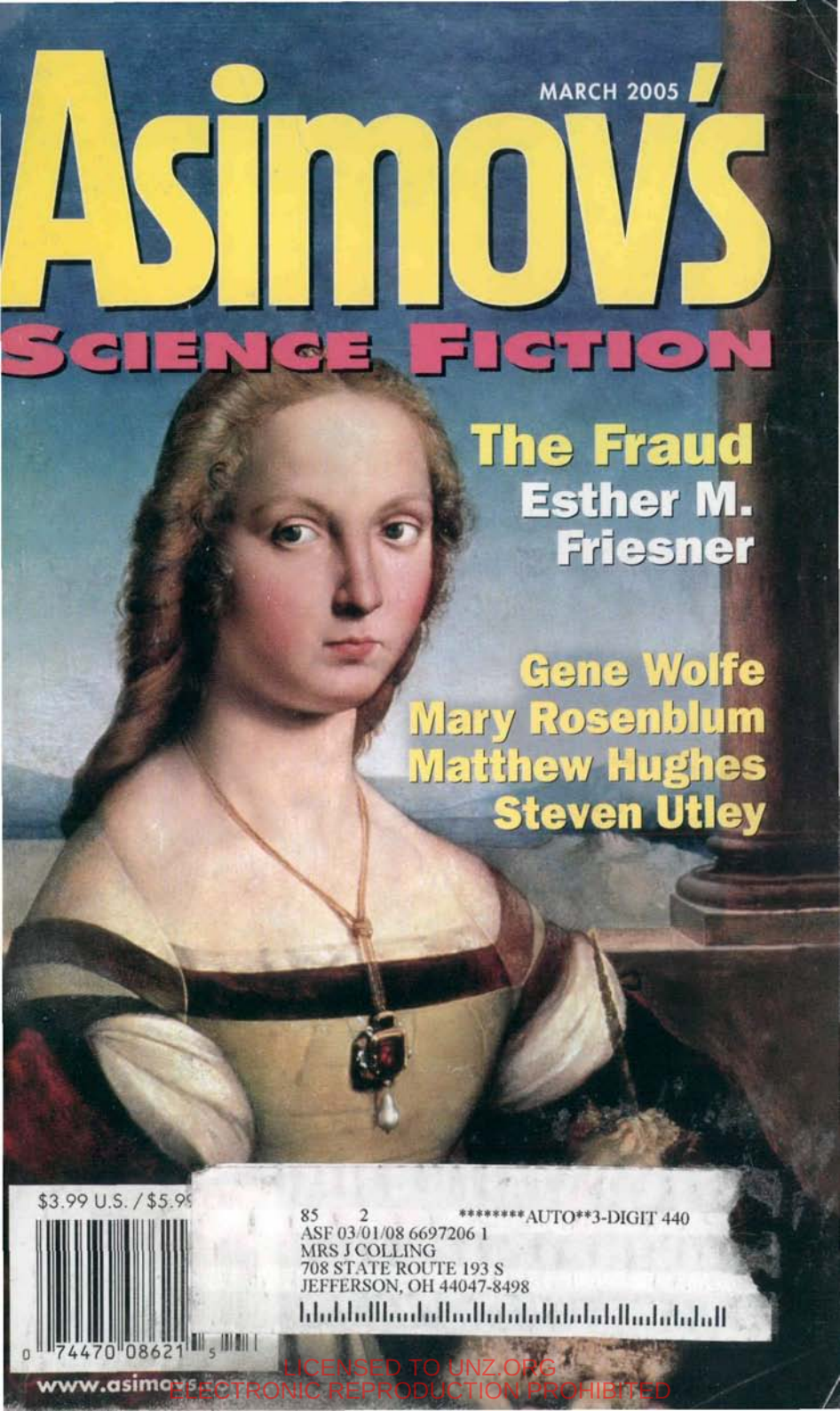

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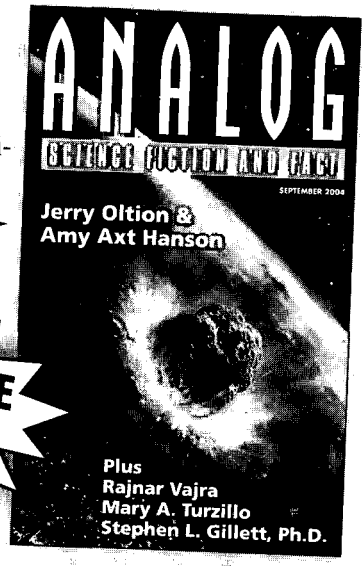

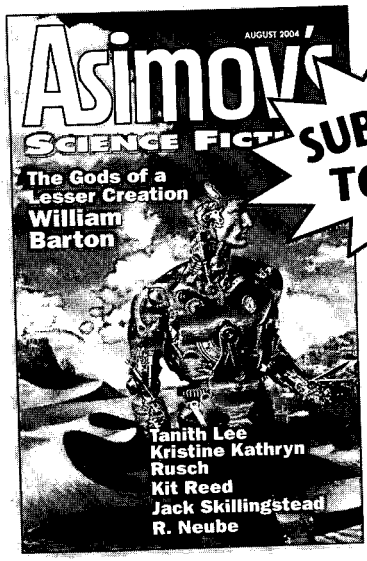

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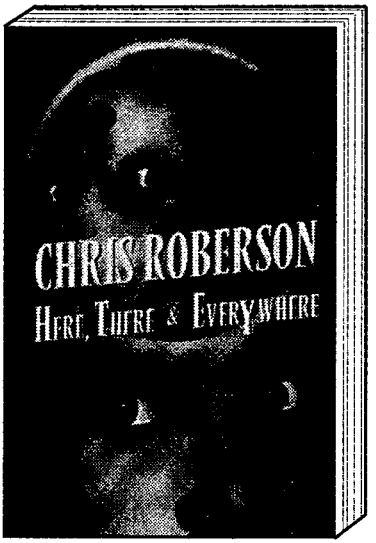

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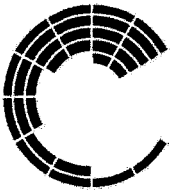

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Sheila Williams

Cover art generally comes to us via a number of avenues. The most direct route is out of the mail or the artist's portfolio and straight across our desks. We also find cover art and artists while strolling through art shows at science fiction conventions, by looking through the gorgeous SF and fantasy art books that come into the office, and by surfing the internet for the websites of well-known genre illustrators. This month's cover, however, arrived from a different direction. The "Portrait of a Young Woman with a Unicorn" is a painting by Raffaello Sanzio (Raphael) of Urbino that is on display at the Borghese Gallery in Rome, Italy. It was painted around 1505, and some people believe it is Raphael's response to the "Mona Lisa."

Although five hundred years separate Raphael's enigmatic portrayal of a young woman and her little unicorn from Esther M. Friesner's clever tale of "The Fraud," the piece struck us as the perfect illustration for the story. Like all non-commissioned art, this cover can not be a literal interpretation of the tale. Still, the beauty of the young woman and the innocence of the infant unicorn resonate with the theme of Esther's moving story. Once I read the author's tale, I knew that I would gladly go to great lengths, including waking at four A.M. to call Italy during European business hours, and translating faxes with the help of Google and an Italian dictionary, to get the rights to this cover. In the end, my art director Victoria Green and I discovered that we needed to look no further than Manhattan's Upper East Side (only sixty blocks away). We are deeply grateful to the Bridgeman Art Library for the right to reproduce this beautiful painting, and delighted to find that the result is as exquisite as we anticipated.

So far this year, we've had the opportunity to feature the work of two modern masters—Michael Whelan on our January cover and Donato Giancola on February's. We look forward to showcasing other contemporary artists as the rest of 2005 unfolds. Science fiction generally encourages authors and artists to look to the future for inspiration. It was fun, though, to find the current cover in the Renaissance.

Our January Thought Experiments column by Roger Ebert has proven very popular. The column will not be running in this month's issue, but new essays (by freelance author Therese Littleton, and SF authors Cory Doctorow and Walter Jon Williams) are scheduled for April/May, June, and July.

Thanks for all your letters of congratulations and encouragement. Once we receive enough feedback about *Asimov's* editorial material we still plan to restart the readers' Letters column. If you'd like to make your thoughts known, please turn to the bottom of page 107 to learn more about where to send your correspondence. ○

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

A PAIR OF RAGGED JAWS

In T.S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," two mysterious lines burst forth suddenly about midway through:

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floor of silent seas.

Eliot is using here, as poets are wont to do, a figure of speech: the one known as *synecdoche,* which means the taking of a part for the whole: "claws" in this sense stands for some sort of marine creature, a lobster or a crab, perhaps, that uses its claws to move along the sea-bottom. Exactly *which* marine creature and *which* sea-bottom Eliot had in mind, no one can say; nor do I have any real explanation of the significance of the entire strange little interjection itself in the context of the poem. But whenever I read it it calls forth for me an image that surely was nothing at all like what Eliot had in mind: that silent sea is, for me, the paleozoic one of the Cambrian or Silurian period of four hundred million years ago, and the owner of that pair of ragged claws is the curious mud-crawling creature known as a *eurypterid,* a vaguely lobsterish thing that reached lengths of eight feet and more. Why Eliot's lines trigger for me this peculiar and obscure image out of remote prehistory is something beyond my understanding.

And why I have begun this column with what seems like a chain of free association is something that will probably become only marginally clear to you when I tell you that it was triggered by the news, last year, of the discovery at the Natural History Museum in London of the oldest known insect fossil, embedded in a chunk of a crystalline rock from Rhynie, Scotland known as chert—a fossil that dates from the very same Silurian period, four hundred million years back, that saw the flourishing of the eurypterids that T.S. Eliot's "ragged claws" line unaccountably calls to my mind. Not that very much of this earliest known of all insects has survived: merely some fragments of its jaws, less than one two-hundred-fiftieth of an inch across. A pair of ragged jaws . . . a pair of ragged claws . . . you see the connection, don't you? Well, maybe.

The significance to paleontologists of this tiny new fossil (not really new, because it sat around in a drawer at the museum for almost a hundred years before anyone bothered to take a close look at it) is that it pushes back our knowledge of insect evolution by millions of years, and may mean that insects had evolved to the point of being able to fly some seventy million years earlier than is presently thought.

That is to say, these tiny fossilized jaws, visible only under a powerful microscope, are not only the oldest known insect fossil by ten or twenty million years, but also are seventy million years older than the oldest known fossil insect *wing.* A pair of jaws, of course,

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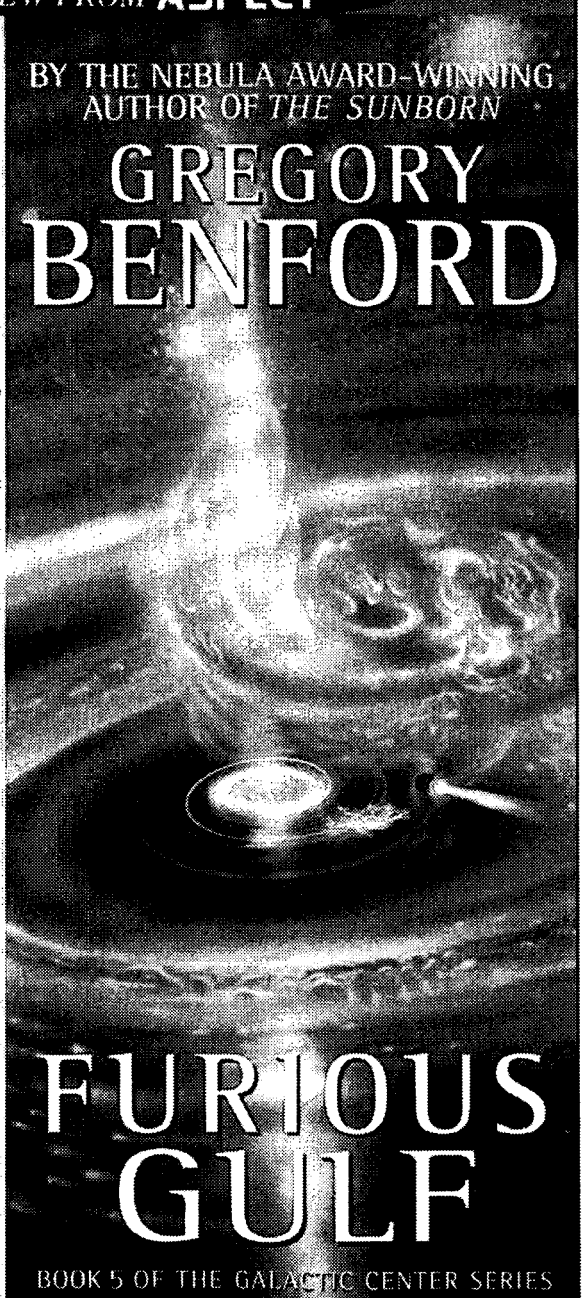

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cannot of itself provide direct evidence that its owner was capable of flight. But the structure of these fossil jaws indicates that this Silurian insect—*Rhyniognatha* is the name that it has been given—was related to a fairly advanced group of later insects that is known to have had wings. The assumption, and at this stage it is only an assumption, is that Rhyniognatha itself, like its presumptive descendants, was able to fly.

The truth of this hypothesis is at present a matter for paleontoentomological controversy. Dr. William Shear, a paleobiologist at Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia who was a discoverer of the previously oldest known insect fossils, has said, "It's a very convincing case," but he also noted that it is impossible to conclude, just on the evidence known so far, that Rhyniognatha *necessarily* was capable of flight. What is still missing, he commented, was the "smoking wing." Scottish scientists even now are digging in the Rhynie chert for more fossil material.

Whether it was three hundred million, four hundred million, or five hundred million years ago that the atmosphere of Earth first was infested with little gnats is, I confess, an issue of only modest concern to non-paleoentomologists like me. But what I do respond to here, with considerable awe and wonder, is the idea that something as tiny and as fragile as the jaws of a minuscule bug could survive for close on half a billion years and then, with the aid of a diamond saw and a microscope, be laid bare for twenty-first-century scientists to analyze.

We can't begin to comprehend a span of time so immense. It is hard enough to cast our minds back to the establishment of Imperial Rome by Augustus Caesar (twenty-one hundred years ago) or the building of the Great Pyramid (forty-five hundred years ago) or the paintings of the cave murals of Lascaux (twenty-five to thirty thousand years ago.) Yet all of that is but a flicker of an eye compared with the antiquity of the dinosaurs, who went thundering across our landscape more than a hundred million years ago. Still, when we look at the ponderous bones of a Stegosaurus, say, in one of our museums, it is not all that difficult to believe that objects so massive could somehow have endured through all that unthinkable length of time. But here in the Natural History Museum in London is this little pair of insect jaws that was already a couple of hundred million years old when Stegosaurus first appeared—that has endured, flimsy as it was, for *four hundred million years*—a ragged pair of jaws, yes, but very durable.

What all this summons into my mind, as I continue the path of free association from T.S. Eliot through my eurypterid to Rhyniognatha, is H.P. Lovecraft's splendid novella, "At the Mountains of Madness" (1936), one of his few genuine science-fiction stories, and a dazzling one. Lovecraft is better known for his creepy-crawly weird tales of eldritch horror, but "Mountains of Madness" was first published in *Astounding Stories,* a science fiction magazine that was the direct ancestor of our very high-tech companion magazine *Analog,* and real science fiction is what it is.

Lovecraft's premise, since destroyed, alas, by modern aerial exploration, is that there is a moun-

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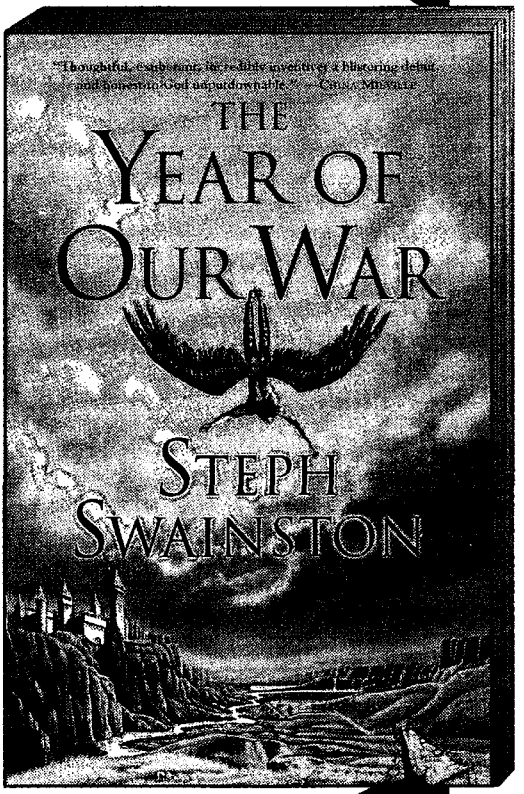

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tain range higher than the Himalayas in the heart of Antarctica, behind which lies a bare plateau that the Antarctic blizzards could not reach. An exploration party from dear old Miskatonic University gets to the foothills of those mountains, where fossil-bearing outcroppings dating from the period when Antarctica was warm and habitable, ranging in age across the half a billion years from the pre-Cambrian through the Pliocene, are discovered. Then an advance party crosses the mountains by plane and finds strata full of Mesozoic fossils— "skeletal fragments of large land and marine saurians and primitive mammals" that display "singular local wounds or injuries to bony structure not attributable to any known predatory or carnivorous animal of any period." And then a more surprising discovery: "a monstrous barrel-shaped fossil of wholly unknown nature," eight feet long, with a barrel-shaped torso, feet at one end and a cluster of tentacles at the other, and huge membranous wings folded against their sides." This leads to the finding of a whole group of these creatures, *and they are not fossils.* Their bodies are leathery and flexible, and their astonishing state of preservation turns out to be the result of their having gone into suspended animation fifty or a hundred million years ago.

What the Miskatonic folk have stumbled on, of course, is a bunch of alien beings, Elder Things straight out of Lovecraft's *Necronomicon:* remnants of a group that had come to Earth from some distant star in pre-Cambrian times, founded a settlement in the heart of Antarctica that flourished for hundreds of millions of years, and, as it happens, are still alive. The Miskatonic explorers find all this out because one group of them continues on inland and eventually comes upon the ruined capital city of these aliens, complete with vivid wall reliefs that tell the history of their race. While this is going on, the aliens back at the first camp, disturbed now in their long slumber, proceed to awaken, kill the explorers who have remained with them, and scoot off into the Antarctic wastes.

Lovecraft's description of the city of the star-creatures is one of the greatest set-pieces in all of SF: "A seething labyrinth of fabulous walls and towers and minarets loomed out of the troubled ice vapors above our heads. The effect was that of a Cyclopean city of no architecture known to man or to human imagination, with vast aggregations of night-black masonry embodying monstrous perversions of geometrical laws. There were truncated cones, sometimes terraced or fluted, surmounted by tall cylindrical shafts here and there bulbously enlarged and often capped with tiers of thinnish scalloped disks; and strange beetling, tablelike constructions suggesting piles of multitudinous rectangular slabs or circular plates or five-pointed stars with each one overlapping the one beneath. There were composite cones and pyramids either alone or surmounting cylinders or cubes or flatter truncated cones and pyramids, and occasional needle-like spires in curious clusters of five. . . ." And so on for dozens of pages of stunningly detailed visionary prose. The whole novella is a wondrous imaginative achievement, a vast and eccentric masterpiece well worth reading even today. (The story, which openly acknowl-

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edges its origins in Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* of a century earlier, was clearly the inspiration for John W. Campbell's classic "Who Goes There?" of three years later. What goes around comes around.)

And the relevance to this essay, you ask? Well, the Miskatonic group, as they study the the pictorial archives of the Old Ones, are able to determine that they tell a tale of cosmic battles on prehistoric Earth, in Cambrian or Silurian times, between this race and another group of aliens led by their great enemy, dread Cthulhu—and this was happening, we now know, at the very same time that little Rhyniognatha was thriving and perhaps even evolving the first tiny insect-wings up there in Scotland. And so we come full circle in our tale. An odd stream of consciousness for a pair of fossil insect jaws to have touched off, perhaps. But we find our awe and wonder wherever we can, and that small gnat-like creature that left its minuscule jaws in the unformed chert strata of Scotland so long ago now is linked for me with Lovecraft's imaginary prehistoric city in the Antarctic as a source of those interesting spine-chills that science fiction and, sometimes, science itself, can often provide. O

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—Bruce Boston

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Nebula-Award-winner Esther M. Friesner is the author of twenty-nine novels and over one hundred short stories, in addition to being the editor of six popular anthologies. She is also a published poet, a playwright, and once wrote an advice column called, "Ask Auntie Esther." Her articles on fiction writing have appeared in *Writer's Market* and *Writer's Digest Books.* Ms. Friesner's latest publications include the novelization of the movie *Men in Black 2* and a short story collection, *Death and the Librarian and Other Stories,* from Thorndike Press. In her latest story, the author takes an unsettling look at the complex levels of deception to determine just who, or what, is . . .

THE FRAUD

Esther M. Friesner

The road down from London was still muddy with springtime rains, despite the calendar's protests of June. George Pengallen shifted his weight in the saddle and felt the stab of sores brought on by too many hours straddling a horse whose ample girth seemed better suited to pulling the plow than to the conveyance of gentlemen, even so financially diminished a young gentleman as himself.

The day was warm, the condition of the roads notwithstanding. A sun that could do nothing towards reducing the level of muck underfoot was remarkably efficient when it came to drying out the solitary rider's throat while at the same time conjuring up rills and rivulets of sweat beneath his clothes. George doffed his tricorn hat and used it to fan himself as though he were the commonest sort of country bumpkin and not the darling of a dozen London drawingrooms. Sunshine cut clean lines of shadow beneath his high cheekbones, laid a dusting of fine golden light over the perfectly drawn angles of his face. Given the necessary particulars attending this journey, he had elected not to wear his wig. His badly cropped blond hair stood in want of a proper barbering, a luxury that his

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starveling purse could ill afford but for which the vanity of his twenty years longed.

Despite his vigorous stirring of the still air with his hat, the heat surrounding him increased. Beads of sweat trickled down from his forehead, stinging at the corners of eyes the bright blue of a winter's frost-nipped sky. He shaded his brow with one hand and peered ahead into the distance, praying to see even a hint that this loathsome journey would soon be at an end.

He was rewarded with the sight of a thin steeple piercing the horizon and, when his mount had lumbered on a few dozen yards farther, with the comforting vista of a village huddled at the church's base. He did not need to consult any written memorandum to know that these were the landmarks he sought. George's memory—well trained by his father's insistence on word-perfect recall of Bible texts from all his children, honed to an unflawed edge by two otherwise wasted years at Cambridge—now unfurled before his mind's eye a *tableau vivant* of the conversation that had followed his last decent dinner in London.

You can not go astray. Lord Edgerton's words played themselves out inside George's head as the image of that florid-faced peer of the realm presented itself in memory so vivid that the young man could almost smell the rancid sweat, stale tobacco, and pungent brandy fumes that always attended his patron as faithfully as a trio of hounds. *Once the village is in sight, you will soon enough come to the road that leads to Munscroft.*

George's remembered self stood with one hand resting upon the mantelpiece of his lordship's library hearth. *There will be no chance of my missing it?* he asked.

None, if you're not a fool. This from Dr. Toombs. He was a small, weedy, bandy-legged man of Lincolnshire blood whose unfortunate pairing of name and profession seemed to have blighted every aspect of his life. George had never heard him speak without somehow managing to cast a withering shadow over the conversation. For all this, he was still Lord Edgerton's most trusted intimate, the man upon whom that peer's judgment relied when he doubted his own.

I hope, sir, that did you take me for a fool you would counsel his lordship not to place so much as a farthing in my trust, let alone a mission of so much delicacy. Perhaps those were not the exact words George had used in the library that evening, but they were what his memory provided.

Dr. Toombs snorted and stretched his legs to the fire, ignoring George's remark, but Lord Edgerton laughed his booming laugh and seemed well pleased with the young man's spirit. Slapping both satin-cased thighs, he exclaimed, *Well said, young Pengallen! Delicacy, aye, there's the very word that nips me at every turn, mousewise. It is that very quality of discretion which I have taken pains to observe in you from the instant of our introduction and which, after some consideration, I now may incontestably pronounce to be admirable, admirable!*

George felt his cheeks heat up, though whether it was from his remembered blushes under his lordship's praise or merely the effect of the June sun, he could not say. There was but little doubt in his mind as to whence

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his lordship had garnered so favorable an opinion of his prudential nature: Lady Charlotte Weathersfield, none other.

It was Lady Weathersfield who had presented the failed Cambridge scholar to his lordship, which was small wonder to the more perspicacious segments of the London gentry. Lady Weathersfield was widely noised about the town as a collector of handsome young gallants, the brilliance of whose intellects was poorly seconded by the ballast of their purses. Her ladyship's inclination in this regard was, in fact, one of those matters which good society had chosen to keep as a public secret: Everyone knew, but everyone worth knowing treated the information as nonexistent.

As for the young men her ladyship so favored, their reigns inevitably proved to be as brief as those of the Four Emperors. More often than not their insightful minds lacked one critical aspect of development, namely when to keep themselves to themselves. Nearly all of them *would* speak of her ladyship's favors—of the body carnal as well as the body financial—and some would go so far as to vaunt their conquest in the coffee houses. This was entirely unsuitable. Her ladyship was fond, but no fool; she knew that the universities would never let her lack for smart young men, one of whom might actually prove to be discreet. There was no need to endure a man who was anything less than wholly satisfactory, no matter the killing power of his *beaux yeux*. Wherefore her wake was littered with the bodies of the brash and impolitic as she sailed on unencumbered into more accommodating seas.

This was not to say that all of her ladyship's alliances ended badly for the young men. George himself had been some four months in her favor when she presented him to Lord Edgerton, at which point that openhearted and outspoken peer had taken it upon himself to lead the young man a little aside and offer him good counsel. He mentioned the names of three gentlemen, all comfortably placed in the government, one risen to the rank of baronet, and gave George to understand that it had been Lady Weathersfield's soft white hand that had placed their feet upon the first rung of the ladder to preferment. *Please me and you please her,* he said, *for we're old friends. Please her and that's the making of you.*

George's sun-heavy memories of Lord Edgerton and Dr. Toombs and Lady Weathersfield rattled about in his brain, twisting and entangling themselves most horribly as he lurched and bounced along atop his lumpish steed. Dr. Toombs's derisive snorts wove themselves into Lady Weathersfield's most amorous sighs, then were in turn braided up into Lord Edgerton's thunderous roars of laughter. Sunlight on the road before him hurt his eyes. His head began to throb, then to spin slightly as he reviewed the tale that he must tell should he encounter any overly inquisitive parties on the road. This same false history must also do to excuse and explain his presence before the servants once he arrived at Munscroft manor. The common folk were always given to frivolous chatter; it would not do at all should word leak out before he had fulfilled his task to the satisfaction of all concerned.

"I have come at the request of Lord Edgerton to study certain monastic manuscripts in the keeping of Sir Hadrian Ashgrave concerning the supposed medicinal qualities of local flora," George recited for the benefit of

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his horse's ears alone. "It is his lordship's hope that there may be something preserved in this ancient lore that will prove to be of use in advancing the cause of scientific inquiry in general and of modern *pharmacopoeia* in particular."

Having unburdened himself of this unwieldy bulk of verbiage, he shook his head. The excuse had been of Dr. Toombs's composition. Any servant overhearing such jabber would likely lose interest in anything further George might say, yet still decide to keep a curious eye on the young man's doings.

"We shall have to keep ourselves all the more secure from prying eyes, in that case," George remarked aloud. "That is all there is to it." And with this declaration of intent, he came very near to riding directly past the portal of Munscroft manor.

It was as if he turned aside from the rational world and passed into one fairy-haunted the instant that his horse clopped between the great black iron gates, each with its artful garniture of a gilded gaze-hound running beneath the curve of a crescent moon. The gates guarded an alleyway of trees so old and venerable in aspect that they had likely reached their full growth in an age when their majestic appearance must have drawn the worship of the local Druids. Beneath their heavy branches, shadows lurked and the few flashes of brightness amid the leafy dark might have been a touch of sunlight or the glint of ill-intentioned elfin eyes.

Even the gatekeeper seemed to belong more properly under a bridge, devouring passers-by who failed to read his riddles rightly, rather than minding the roadway to Sir Hadrian's fine residence. He afforded George no chance to rattle through the concocted reasons for his visit, but gnashed his stubby yellow teeth around the equally stubby mouthpiece of a white clay pipe and passed him in.

To his relief, George encountered a far more mundane reception awaiting him when he reached the manor house itself. Either the aged troll gatekeeper had dispatched word of his arrival via dark and mystic arts, or else (more likely) had sent along a boy to run ahead through sidepaths and byways and alert the hall. Whichever the case, by the time George came within hail of the house, a satisfactory number of Sir Hadrian's servants were already in place before the doors, anticipating him.

He was ushered into the house while many hands whisked away his horse and his scanty baggage (save only that one small brown leather box from which he would not be parted under any circumstances), whither he neither knew nor cared. The fellow who conducted him into Sir Hadrian's presence wore his livery as though it were sackcloth, and was in fact such a living exemplar of gloom that George decided here was Dr. Toombs's own soulmate. Together they passed through rooms whose furnishings and ornamentation offered satisfying harmonies of color and form to the eye. George found himself to be so taken up with silent admiration for Sir Hadrian's living arrangements that it was only gradually brought home to him that he was not being led *to* any particular room but rather *through* most of the house and out again by another way than that which had admitted him.

The sun was still warm when George's glum Virgil conducted him out-

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of-doors and into the heart of the manor house gardens. Curiosity became a secondary ache in George's saddle-ravaged bones. He had not been given so much as a cup of water to wet down the dust of travel. If he had allowed this glaring failure of hospitality to pass, it was only because he had expected to be brought before Sir Hadrian somewhere indoors, where the two of them might enjoy refreshment together. But this—! Oversight easily metamorphosed into insult in George's mind. A man of limited means he might be, but he was still a gentleman; such treatment was not to be borne. By the time the servant conveyed him within the precincts of a small but perfectly kept rose garden, he was nursing the pique of a man far more significant than himself.

The rose garden was journey's end, for here Sir Hadrian himself stood ministering to the fragrant plants as if he were a common hired gardener. It was only a mercy ascribable in equal parts to Heaven and Lord Edgerton that George did not mistake the master for one of his men on the spot. Certainly such a blunder would have been understandable, in the circumstances: Sir Hadrian wore the simple garb of one who made his living grubbing in the dirt of other people's holdings, complete with a rustic's wide-brimmed straw hat. Fortunately, Lord Edgerton had seen fit to take George aside before his departure and familiarize him with his host's appearance by showing him a miniature of the man, for which considerate foresight the youth was deeply grateful.

Sir Hadrian was rapt in contemplation of his roses. It was only when the servant made a great noise of clearing his throat that the older man became aware that he was not alone. His cheerful countenance at once broke into an even more generous expression of joy as he came forward to bid George welcome to Munscroft. As the two gentlemen closed, George was at last able to see that what he had taken for simple gardener's garb was, in actuality, made of cloth too fine for any but a man of Sir Hadrian's rank to possess.

There is no evidence, however seemingly conclusive on the face of it, that can not be made to deceive. Again Dr. Toombs's dour judgment sounded in George's ear. *Rascals and charlatans are more pernicious in this nation than highwaymen, as pestiferous and vile an infestation as weevils in good bread.*

And Lord Edgerton's laugh once more preceded his remembered words: *Come, come, Dr. Toombs, why so bitter? It's not as if you were one of the king's examiners, taken like a plump pigeon by the plausible Mrs. Tofts! Or was her chicanery great enough that you must now take it upon yourself to decry all such possibilities for the honor of the medical profession in general?*

In the garden, Sir Hadrian clasped George's free hand in his own, a gesture of such warmth and sincerity that the young man stood charmed on the spot. "You have come! And have you brought—?" He glanced down at the leather box in George's unyielding grip. "Ah! Excellent." The older man removed his wide-brimmed hat to reveal the white cotton kerchief beneath. The weather had waxed warmer since George's arrival and the rose garden was for choice exposed to the best of the sun's nurturing rays. Sir Hadrian removed the kerchief and used it to mop his streaming face

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and clean-shaven head while he spoke. "I beg your pardon for this unworthy reception, but I was so eager for your arrival that I left word at the house that you must be brought straightaway into my presence the instant you reached us. Now that you are here, permit me to offer you a more fitting reception. Come! We shall have something cool to drink and something to stay our stomachs. My cook's skills are nothing beside those of Lord Edgerton's man, but I hope you will not find too much fault with the victuals. We live very simply here in the country."

Uttering these and similar sentiments, Sir Hadrian escorted George back to the house where, true to his word, they were served and well served with meat and drink that was simple yet satisfying. They took this refreshment not in the dining room of the manor house, but at a small table in Sir Hadrian's library. George observed closely how Sir Hadrian took especial pains to secure the doors of the room against the potential incursions of household staff. The doors themselves were thick and heavy, proof against the most determined eavesdropper. As for the keyhole, a favored tool of uninvited auditors everywhere, once Sir Hadrian had removed the key itself he stuffed the aperture with the same cloth which had insulated his head in the rose garden. When he had done with these precautions, he took his place at the table without further ado.

When they had done with the cold sliced beef, the bread and cheese and beer, Sir Hadrian sat back in his chair and announced, "So! To business, eh? You have been represented to me as a young man of rich intellectual gifts, a keen, inventive mind, and no patience with quackery. No doubt Lord Edgerton and Dr. Toombs have given you some notion of the problem here facing us all?"

George withdrew a little into himself. "Some, yes," he said, with the merest hint of hesitation. "And I hope with all my heart that this, my unworthy contrivance, may soon provide us with a satisfactory solution." He patted the leather box which he now balanced on his knees.

Sir Hadrian's chuckle put George in mind of a Drury Lane portrayal of that stock character, the Indulgent Father, so much so that the young man mused on whether or not his host had copied that very mannerism from the stage. So theatrical an affectation went well with Sir Hadrian's inclination for masquerading as the hired gardener among the roses. Perhaps there was nothing to it, yet on the other hand . . . George consecrated this observation to memory, for whatever it might be worth in future, and attended Sir Hadrian's words.

"My dear young friend," his host was saying, "you are too modest. Lord Edgerton has already communicated to me the wonders of your invention. He could not praise it or you highly enough. I am extremely grateful that you have consented to conceal its virtues from the world's inquiring eyes for only a little while longer, the better to serve our cause."

George lowered his eyes. If Sir Hadrian liked to think of him as a humble fellow, he would perform the role to the best of his ability. "How could I do less?" he asked, couching his voice barely above a murmur. "Lord Edgerton has been my patron; I am in his debt. Since he esteems you as his oldest and dearest friend, much concerned with the outcome of the present situation, I consider myself to be in your debt too."

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"And in good company, eh?" Again the chuckle, this time with a shade more of the affected about it. Sir Hadrian was nervous and attempting to conceal the fact from his guest and would-be inquisitor. He did so poorly.

"Sir?"

"Nothing, nothing. Well then," said Sir Hadrian. "Has Lord Edgerton informed you *fully* of the conundrum before us?"

"So I hope, sir."

"Tell me then, young man, if you will do so as a favor to my gray hairs—" (Here Sir Hadrian passed one thick-fingered hand over the crest of his perfectly hairless skull and summoned up an ingenuous smile meant to charm utterly) "—what your initial reaction was when he took you into confidence in this . . . delicate matter."

"My reaction you well may guess," George replied. "I thought that his lordship was pleased to jest with me, a jape based on the late commotion surrounding Mrs. Tofts's grand deception."

"Not so grand, my boy, not so grand as all that." Sir Hadrian reached for the earthenware fruitbowl in the middle of the table and helped himself to a withered apple, a relic of autumn past. Paring it with a penknife he said, "For their vulgar scheme in pursuit of an undeserved pension, Mrs. Tofts and her husband *do* deserve a hanging, and that in short order." He spoke hotly, and for the first time in their brief acquaintance George saw Sir Hadrian in quite another light than that of the affable master of a bountiful domain. There was somewhat of the divinely possessed Old Testament prophet in him now, a transformation as startling as it was impressive.

"Sir Hadrian, you surprise me," George said, leaning forward to engage his host's regard. "Mrs. Tofts's deception was audacious, but hardly criminal to the degree that you suggest. When her stratagem was discovered, she and her husband were sent packing empty-handed, made public laughingstocks. Exposure and ridicule were surely punishment enough, to say nothing of the discomforts that foolish woman must have suffered during the execution of their scheme."

"Think you so?" Sir Hadrian now glowered at George as if the young man himself had been a willing and eager accomplice in the matter of the Tofts's failed cozenage. "I was told that besides your other natural gifts, you were also a young man of imagination. Can you not now bring that reputedly innovative mind of yours to the task of theorizing precisely how deeply that Tofts slut has harmed the cause of *true* scientific inquiry? Can you not see how her shameless fraud has made our own way out of darkness all the more difficult?"

George sighed and slumped back in his chair. "You are correct, Sir Hadrian, I freely cede the point. I well recall the hubbub that the Tofts case stirred up in the city. A simple country woman who claimed to have been assaulted by a rabbit of human size! Who could credit such a wild tale? And yet, I have seen the bones of giants laid out before my eyes, and the bones of dragons too. Dr. Toombs has some few precious examples of these in his possession; he assures me that all were excavated from English soil. If such things can be, why not a gigantic rabbit? Country folk have a reputation for speaking the truth because they lack the creative faculty for formulating complex lies."

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"Spoken like one who has spent little or no time in the country." Sir Hadrian sounded weary. He carved small slices of yellow apple flesh from the peeled fruit in his hand and popped them into his mouth one by one. "And so, of course, when the Tofts trull was later brought to bed of not one, not two, but a whole warren of infant rabbits, that was all the scientific proof any man seemed to need." He spat out an errant apple seed and added, "Fools."

"They were not fools," George maintained, to not a little of Sir Hadrian's surprise. "Or at any rate their judgment in the matter of Mrs. Tofts's miraculous birthings was one that you yourself might have shared with them, given the evidence as they were allowed to view it. If you deem yourself wiser than they, it is only the gift of hindsight."

The younger man was satisfied to observe his host's stunned reaction to being thus gainsaid by someone both many years his junior and nowhere near his social equal. It was a bold stroke, and one which George had calculated on using here at Munscroft as he had used it many times before in London, to as good effect. He had learned early on that slavish toadying was not the way to win favor from Lord Edgerton and his ilk. Unvarnished sycophancy was too common a trait of those hopeful fishies who schooled around the great and the wealthy, gaping after preferment.

Ah, but to be so bold as to hold an opinion other than that of one's patrons, one's masters—! Nay, to speak in flat contradiction when one had everything to lose by offending them—! George could not begin to number the ladies and gentlemen of the peerage who had come to treat him with a respect in no way due his pocket nor his breeding thanks to this seemingly artless ploy.

"Is that so?" said Lord Hadrian. "You are *quite* certain that I would have been led the same dance as the rest?"

"The woman was sly and her husband was clever," George replied with a casual shrug of his shoulders. "Besides which, they had obviously resolved to go to any lengths required to establish the veracity of their claims. For her womb to appear to produce rabbits, the creatures must first be concealed somewhere within either the folds of her bed linen or her nightdress and then introduced to the womb itself. For the first stage, I believe she had sewn herself a nightdress of particular design, one concealing many deep and secret pockets, but for the illusion of the birth itself—" He could not repress a shudder at the thought. "It can not have been an experience that was other than painful, and yet she did it many times, for the eyes of many witnesses."

"A determined wench if nothing else," Sir Hadrian muttered.

"Determination will often carry the day against a host of nobler virtues," George said. "As will plain animal stubbornness."

Sir Hadrian grumbled something indistinguishable and got up to retrieve two white clay pipes from a rack near the hearth as well as a Delft jar of good Virginia tobacco. He filled both pipes and passed one to his guest before lighting them with a sliver of kindling wood. The library filled with clouds of aromatic smoke, to George's chagrin. He did not believe that such a censing could be very good for the books, although there were many of his former fellow scholars who assured him that tobacco

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fumes were a sovereign preventative against the depredations of bookworms and other vermin.

Once Sir Hadrian had taken the first few puffs at his pipe, he spoke again: "I believe that you are right after all, my boy: Had I been one of the first witnesses to Mrs. Tofts's sham I very likely would have been as readily deceived. Ingenuity and guile, both coupled with greed, tsk, where's the honest man can say he'd have the insight to escape the snares such a partnership might lay before his wit?"

"Even the king's own physician was gulled," George reminded him. "His Majesty stood ready to award the rustic charlatans a royal pension when the fraud was finally proven."

"And so easily," Sir Hadrian mused. "So simply it is a wonder none thought of it before the matter came so far. All it wanted was to confine the boldfaced hussy to a solitary room with no hope of communication with her husband nor with any other confidante or conspirator."

"I had heard that she was relegated to a hospital and kept under the eyes of female religious," George said. "This confinement ended in no further births, but rather a full confession, and there was an end to it."

"So, just so," Sir Hadrian agreed. He shifted himself in his chair, then added, "Permit me to assure you, my lad, that *our* case is nothing like the Tofts affair. For myself, I assure you that I neither seek nor require a pension from His Majesty. As for the notoriety which this matter will no doubt elicit, I dread it. I would be a far happier man were there some guarantee that no news whatsoever of the phenomenon escape the bounds of Munscroft. I am fond of the peaceful life, you see."

"But it *will* be noised about, sir," George pointed out. "You can not have imagined that it would be otherwise."

"No, of course not." Sir Hadrian took another pull at his pipe and let the smoke escape his lips borne on a worldweary sigh. "Had it been left to me, I would not have spoken of the matter to another soul. But the choice was never mine. She came to me in an unlucky hour, and in worse circumstances. Lord Edgerton was visiting with me at the time."

"His lordship bids me remind you that he is determined to keep his word concerning the absolute secrecy shrouding the matter," George felt bound to interject. "Naturally he has taken Dr. Toombs into his confidence, but no one else."

"No one but you, eh?" Sir Hadrian's kindly eyes recovered a little of their old twinkle. "And your device. How long will it be, do you think, before such wonderful contrivances eliminate entirely the need for men like Dr. Toombs?"

"Never, I trust." George thought the moment apt for another touch of becoming humility. "I am nowhere near his equal in knowledge."

"Knowledge which is old and hidebound, knowledge which must make way for fresh inquiry." Sir Hadrian arose from his chair and knocked the last few embers from his pipe into the fireplace. "Nothing like the new wisdom for which we all soon must praise young men of science like you."

"Thank you, sir." George was already on his feet, having made haste to rise with his host. He mimicked the older man's business with his own

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pipe, although he found this somewhat difficult to do while still holding fast to the brown leather box. "And now, will it please you that we proceed? Lord Edgerton informed me that your last letter to him spoke of certain changes—?"

"Yes." Sir Hadrian cut him off brusquely, again looking ill at ease. "The situation has not progressed as I anticipated. We had better settle it soon. Come along, lad, come along. You shall see for yourself." He linked arms with George and hurried him out of the library.

They rushed from the house itself as if Munscroft were aflame. George was astonished by his host's almost youthful fleetness of foot. Stables and herbaries, scatterings of grazing sheep and stands of leafy fruit trees, all passed before his eyes in a blur as Sir Hadrian hauled him along at the quickstep. At last, they entered a wildwood bordering a pasture where grass grew thick and lush. George wondered at this a little, for even a citified fellow like himself knew that Sir Hadrian's stock would fatten profitably on this land. And yet it stood untouched.

The meadow is the moat, he thought, *meant to keep away the questioning eyes of cowherds, and the wildwood is the closely guarded castle. Which means that soon enough I shall behold the princess in her tower.* He was rather proud of the image and resolved to employ it in a poem that he would write to further secure the affections and favors of Lady Weathersfield.

The "tower" turned out to be a rustic cottage in the heart of an old and well established grove of oak and beech. A tiny vegetable garden had been hacked out of the soil beside the door and a few early shoots of greenery languished in what sunlight could penetrate the overreaching canopy of the great trees. An old woman armed with a hoe labored there, chopping at weeds.

"That is the girl's mother, Madame Christophe," Sir Hadrian whispered, laying a hand on George's sleeve. "They come of a respected Huguenot family although, alas, much diminished. The lady's brother was a silk merchant, a praiseworthy man and an excellent companion. Only death could abrogate the joy I took in his society." He paused, then shrugged. "But that is irrelevant. Let it suffice you to know that when the lady could no longer live in peace on her native soil for fear of religious persecution, she communicated her plight to me. For her brother's sake I welcomed her. She is a widow and has been my guest for upwards of three years."

George gave the laboring Frenchwoman a nervous sideways glance. "She does not seem to be aware of our presence."

"Age has made her somewhat dull of hearing. I'll draw her attention. Hoi! Madame Christophe! We've come!" He bellowed the greeting, causing the older woman to look up from her labors. She did not smile, which George thought a great pity, for she had one of those noble faces whose austere lineaments would be elevated from mere handsomeness to true beauty by a pleasant expression.

But then, what cause has she to smile? he reminded himself, and walked forward with Sir Hadrian to meet her.

Madame Christophe spoke a passable English, only slightly affected by

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the intonations of her native tongue. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Pengallen," she said, with an unmistakable touch of diffidence not lost on George.

"And I yours, *madame*. I trust that Sir Hadrian has told you of my purpose?"

"He has." Her tongue was ice.

"Then perhaps he has not informed you in sufficient detail. Permit me to assure you that I will offer your daughter neither offense nor the least harm." He raised the box almost to eye level for her inspection. "This device is perfectly—"

"I don't care if you've packed half of hell in that thing!" Madame Christophe spat. Her vehemence came as a blow, and, for an instant, George felt his innards shrink under a gaze as severe and penetrating as that of any judge who had just donned the black cap of the death sentence. "It is no more nor less than what she merits. Do with her what you please." With that she turned her back on him and stiffly led the way through the cottage door.

The interior of the cottage was scrupulously clean, at least as far as George could tell by the scant light which the two small windows admitted. It consisted of a single space which had been divided in two by a crude canvas curtain. Madame Christophe drew this aside with neither comment nor ceremony, revealing a bed whose rich wood, fine workmanship, and ample furnishings made it stand out freakishly from its humble surroundings, like a duchess on a dunghill. There sat the girl, propped up on a monstrous pile of pillows and bolsters, her body heaped with bed linens despite the summer weather. At first George viewed her as no more than his goal, a random shape, a gaming piece awaiting the player's hand, but then his eyes became accustomed to the miserly light and for the first time he truly *saw* her.

She was beautiful enough to make a man forget to breathe. Hair the color of ripe wheat was drawn tightly into a single plait which coiled across her bosom like a golden chain. Her eyes had that same open and artless appearance peculiar to very young children, and yet their emerald depths shone with a look of intelligence and eager inquiry that was both flattering and fascinating. A shy smile curved the corners of her mouth, a charming expression whose brief life was cut short by an abrupt bark of reprimand from Madame Christophe. At her mother's word she immediately lowered her eyes and turned her face away from the two men, a rush of rosy color drowning her pale cheeks.

"My daughter Marie." Madame Christophe spoke the girl's name as if her mouth held a bite of sour plum. "She will answer all your questions; I have told her to do so, although I do not see what good it will do or how it will change her circumstances. We are shamed. *I* am shamed."

"*Madame*, do not be hasty," George tried to reassure her. "It may be that your daughter's story will prove—"

"She is a *fool*!" The older woman's shout echoed strangely in the confines of the cottage. "Do not mistake me for one as well. I would never have come before our benefactor as she did, with so great a burden of brazen nonsense on my lips."

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"But *maman*, it was not—" The girl's protests were weak and quickly squelched by a sharp slap from her mother.

"Be silent! Oh, if only I had been at home that day! I would have taught you the wisdom of a well-governed tongue. But I was in the village, gone to market to satisfy *your* vanity. My lady must have ribbons to deck her dress! And to deck *this*?" With one unexpected movement Madame Christophe seized the bedclothes shielding her daughter's body and flung them aside, revealing the girl in nothing but her nightclothes. The mound of her belly rose up beneath its thin covering of linen like a beehive.

George could not repress a gasp at the sight. In his life he had seen women great with child, but this bordered on the unbelievable. "Sir Hadrian," he said, his voice faltering, "was not Lord Edgerton your guest when this girl came before you with her tale?"

"He was." Sir Hadrian no longer seemed inclined to play the garrulous host.

"But— but that was not three months ago."

"In April."

"And was she so advanced in her condition then?"

"No." The master of Munscroft pursed his lips. "There was not even the slightest swelling of her belly then. These are the changes of which I wrote Lord Edgerton."

"Impossible." George shook his head vigorously, his true mission cast violently from his mind for the moment. "Incredible. To come to such a size in three months' time of the supposed assault—!"

"Yes, incredible." Sir Hadrian looked grim. "Worse than that, plausible only in the face of accepting her story as she tells it. And that, lad, is a thing we dare not do."

"No?" George could not take his eyes from the girl's enormous belly. It exercised a horrific, hypnotic spell over him that not even the perfections of Mademoiselle Christophe's person had the power to break. "Wh—why not?"

"For the sake of science," Sir Hadrian replied, and again George noted the look of nigh spiritual transformation that passed over his host's face. "For the sake of holy reason."

"Sir, how can you say such a thing?"

"How can I say aught *but* such a thing?" Sir Hadrian countered. He turned his attention to the girl in the bed. By this time Mademoiselle Christophe was weeping softly, with scarcely any sound to accompany the limpid tears cascading down her cheeks. "My dear," he said to her in his most kindly, least genuine voice. "My dear, I fear that our young Mr. Pengallen comes to us affected by the second-hand testimony of my good friend, Lord Edgerton. You remember him, do you not? He was the gentleman in my company on the day you burst into my library to recount your ordeal. As I recall, he left us rather precipitously after that."

"Yes." Marie raised her brimming eyes to meet Sir Hadrian's gaze. George thought his heart must stop at so piercingly tender a look. "Yes, I remember him. I am afraid that he—like you—thought me mad."

"Tut-tut, my child, I have never called you mad, have I?" Sir Hadrian patted her hand, under Madame Christophe's flinty eye. "Make no false

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assumptions. I am a man of science, albeit my specific inquiries have been limited by circumstance to the study of roses. Still, I value above all things the ability to keep an open mind, as does Mr. Pengallen himself. Tell him, I entreat you, in your own words, how you came to be in this condition."

"Yes, speak up, girl." Madame Christopher gave her daughter an ungentle touch on the shoulder. "But do not elaborate. You are in enough trouble as matters stand without decking out your sins in fabrications."

"Hush, *madame*, let her speak," Sir Hadrian said. "There is no proof as yet to brand her a liar." Madame Christophe only grumbled something unintelligible in her native tongue and subsided into brooding silence.

The girl drew a deep breath that rasped over a quantity of still unshed tears. "It was the fifth of April." Her English was melodious, her lilting accent an ornament rather than a flaw. "*Maman* had gone to the village, as she has said. I was alone in the cottage and, having finished my household duties, wanted some way in which to pass the time until she might return."

"You might have found some other employment than wanton rambling over the entire countryside," her mother broke in sternly. "Had you given yourself to your prayerbook, you should not now stand in want of God's mercy."

"*Madame*, I implore you, let the child speak," said Sir Hadrian.

Madame Christophe glowered at him. "She has said too much already. I cannot endure hearing her lies told and told again, and so audaciously! Was it to this end that I begged this humble dwelling of you? When we first came here, you offered to share the comforts of your home with us, but I refused. I feared that if we stayed beneath your roof my girl might attract the notice of some overbold servant. I thought to raise her here, in solitude, far from all the blandishments of men and the temptations of the flesh." She laughed; it was a hollow, bitter sound.

"*Maman, maman*, I swear to you, no man has touched me!" Marie cried, grasping for her mother's hands wildly. "If you will not believe me, then summon a midwife and let her testify to my virginity!"

Madame Christophe drew back from her daughter's pleading gestures as if from the edge of the Pit itself. "Bah! After what you claim befell you, what can be left of your maidenhead but tatters?"

"But I have told you, he never did—!"

"Harlot! Boldfaced whore!"

George felt a great anger growing hot within him. He could not bear Marie's patent anguish, nor to witness her mother's adamant want of pity. He strode up to Madame Christophe, took her firmly by the shoulders, and propelled her towards the door of her own house, saying the while, "Madame, I think it best if I hear the remainder of your child's statement privily."

"Yes, yes," Sir Hadrian said, taking the widow's arm and doing his part to hurry her from the cottage. "He's right, there can be no harm in it, you and I shall be right outside."

"The harm is done," Madame Christophe asserted, but she did not struggle, fearing perhaps to irk her benefactor. Thus it was that George soon found himself alone with the still weeping Marie.

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"*Mademoiselle*, take comfort," he said gently, stealing near to her bedside. "I do not come to judge you. I believe you have been judged enough, and over-hastily. Pray continue with your account."

The exquisite girl wiped her eyes with a bit of her bed linens and gulped back her sorrow. "Thank you, sir, you are good to me," she said. "*Maman* too is good, only she has been driven almost frantic by what has happened to us both since I made the mistake of telling Sir Hadrian and his friend that—"

"Forget your good mother," George counseled her, his words warm and wheedling. "Forget Sir Hadrian and Lord Edgerton. Tell *me*."

"Very well." Like a schoolboy called upon to recite, the girl composed herself, clasped her hands over the parlous swelling of her belly, and began: "I have already told you that I wanted entertainment that day, and so I thought to take a walk in the woodland. I have always enjoyed such rambles. It is quite safe; I once heard Sir Hadrian tell *maman* that his gamekeepers are the terror of tramps and poachers."

"Indeed," said George, but as he feasted his eyes upon Marie's beauty a crooked thought wriggled through his mind: *The gamekeepers guard the land, yet who guards the guardians? Still, if her belly's the work of one of Sir Hadrian's gamekeepers, why would she seek to excuse it with so grotesque a tale? Unless . . . Perhaps it was not the man who used her, but the master. She is loveliness itself; Sir Hadrian's old, not dead. If he enjoyed her person against her will, no doubt he saw it as the natural perquisite of his charity to her mother and herself. And what recourse could she hope for? None. She and her mother are entirely dependent upon him and she knows it. Lesser burdens of the mind than this have driven women mad.*

"I came to a lake that lies not far from this house," Marie continued, unaware of how George's thoughts inclined. "It is a place I know well. It is very small, truly little more than a pond, perfectly round and with waters silvery and cool as the face of the moon. I think that it is no natural place, for smooth stones ring the shore."

"Perhaps it is the relic of some long-lost Roman villa," George suggested. "Was it there it happened? By the lake?"

The girl nodded, and fresh tears welled up unbidden in her eyes. "I did not see him approach. I was seated on one of the flat stones, gazing into the water, when I felt a damp warmth on the nape of my neck. I looked up and he was at my shoulder."

"Impossible," George objected. "There, so suddenly, with not even a reflection cast in the water to forewarn you?"

"Nothing." Marie took a deep breath and released a ragged sigh. "At first I did not fear him. He was so beautiful. I had never seen his like in life before. Oh, how he shone! White, whiter than clouds, or new milk, or good bread! Once I saw a picture of such as he, a weaving that hangs in Sir Hadrian's own house. The creature depicted there is a scrawny thing, with a goat's beard and a horn like a peeled twig. Mine was not like that: He was magnificence itself. His horn soared from the center of his brow like a sword made of starlight. I reached out to touch it; I looked into his eyes and saw all my dreams."

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George regarded the enraptured girl askance. *No doubt, then,* he thought. *Unless she ends this story by claiming she was raped by Europa's own bull, minus one horn, it is a unicorn she means. A unicorn!*

A unicorn! cried Dr. Toombs. *And you did not at once chain her up safe? The girl's a bedlamite or I'm a Turk!* His phantom face scowled upon the air between George and Marie as the girl went on to speak of how the beast, her beast, her unicorn, had changed from wondrous apparition to present horror.

She claimed the brute, all unexpectedly, dealt her a hard blow to the temple with his horn so that she fell into the lake. George's recollection of Lord Edgerton mouthed almost the selfsame words Marie now recited for him. The peer's mouth twitched as if he could not resolve whether to recount the story soberly or as a jest. *And indeed she was drenched to the bone when she burst into the library, that much is fact. She claimed to recall little after that, save only the sight of the creature looming over her through the water, hooves flailing. Then it lowered its horn to touch the surface of the pool, which sent a sudden heat through all her limbs and then, said she, oblivion. She regained her senses on the lakeshore with no idea of how she'd come to escape drowning. She came to us directly thereafter.*

Dr. Toombs sniffed. *And what of other evidence than that? No sign of bruises? Of blood?*

None. At the time I thought it might be wise to summon a midwife from the village to examine the girl, but Sir Hadrian forbade it.

On what grounds?

What other? The Tofts case. My dear Dr. Toombs, for all Sir Hadrian's piping paeans in praise of reason, he is wholly unreasonable upon that subject. One hearing of the girl's account was enough to send him into fits of dire suspicion. He dreads that the sacred honor of science will be besmirched yet again if word of this gets out.

You mean he believes she intends to follow the Tofts's example in the promotion of her own interests? How, *in God's name? Is she determined to birth a herd of unicorns?* Dr. Toombs might have laughed then, had it been in his nature. *Bah! Empty fears. Sir Hadrian lives in the country and controls the girl's comings and goings: Who will ever hear of this folderol beyond the bounds of Munscroft if he will not have it so?*

Ah, but you see, word has *escaped.* Lord Edgerton's eyes sparkled and he touched his chest. *Behold the very vessel of that fugitive word.*

You? You're not fool enough to speak of such nonsense publicly.

You know that to be true, as do I, as does our young friend Pengallen here. Sir Edgerton's specter gestured at George even as Marie described her tearful interview with Sir Hadrian and his friend. *And yet I have written to Sir Hadrian saying that my silence is not . . . reliable. For you see, I have told him—one man of science to another—that it is my belief that we must keep an open mind in all matters of natural history which remain in scientific question.*

But a unicorn! Dr. Toombs's look of consternation was almost comic. *Insane. Absurd.*

Why? Because you *have never seen one?* Lord Edgerton was pleased to

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twit his friend. *You have never seen Virginia either, and yet you easily accept that distant land's existence.*

That is different, Dr. Toombs sputtered. *There is evidence: Traders' and travelers' testimony, trade goods, most excellent tobacco—*

Just as there may very well be evidence of unicorns presently dwelling in Mademoiselle Christophe's great belly. Lord Edgerton grinned. *We shall just have to wait and see, hm? Or so I told Sir Hadrian. You may imagine his alarm, and for a reason less fanciful than that his woods may be infested with liquorish beasts.*

Eh?

Marie Christophe was speaking of a gamekeeper's report, a Mayday tale of a strange creature glimpsed in the woodland, shot at, likely dealt a deathwound to judge by the copious trail of strangely colored blood it left in its wake before blood trail and creature both vanished utterly at the margin of the same lake of Marie's tearful telling, but George heard only his own voice, explaining things to Dr. Toombs:

Sir Hadrian is reason's fool, devoted to preserving the sacred name of science at all costs. He cherishes its pristine reputation as dearly as he does his own—so Lord Edgerton tells me—and flies into a passion at the least threat to it.

You know this to be true, Lord Edgerton reminded Dr. Toombs. *You have yourself witnessed his bloodthirsty cries for retribution against the Tofts.*

The man's possessed on the subject, Dr. Toombs muttered.

He is also, alas, possessed of an equally fanatic zeal in the matter of collecting certain— George glanced at Lord Edgerton and received the peer's reluctant nod for him to conclude: *—debts.*

You've not yet repaid him that sum you owe? Dr. Toombs goggled. *Good Lord, do you know how long it's been that—?*

I know, Lord Edgerton snarled. *I will not have you shame me for it any more than I will allow that fool Hadrian the liberty.*

But Sir Hadrian has his own shame to cover, George put in, *and that will be Lord Edgerton's salvation. He forbade the summoning of a midwife. Why? There can be but one logical reason: The woman would discover that the girl's condition was too far advanced for her misfortune to have occurred that day. Revelation would bring questioning, questioning under which the girl might—with witnesses present—at last most artfully confess that her tale of rampant unicorns was the product of a momentary madness brought on by her desperate secret.*

To wit, that Sir Hadrian himself had long enjoyed her favors, Lord Edgerton interrupted.

Hmm, now that's *the first sensible explanation I've heard in the case.* Dr. Toombs stroked his chin. *It would seem that the dilemma which holds Sir Hadrian has two horns, not one. If he presses the girl to speak the truth, his precious reputation's tarred with the whoremaster's brush, yet if he lends even the least credence to her extraordinary tale—*

—he imperils the still more precious reputation of pure science, George concluded.

Nor can he avoid the need to make that choice, Lord Edgerton said. *For I was there to hear her speak, and I will ever be there to remind him of*

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this. Bastard or beast, what does the girl's womb carry? There's the question! He laughed.

A question you're willing to set aside for the price of your debt. Dr. Toombs's expression was equally divided between admiration and distaste. *Yet are you certain your sheep will run the way you wish to drive them? I know how much you owe him: It would be cheaper for Sir Hadrian to hire some servant to admit paternity than to forgive you so great a sum.*

Which is why I have built my fences sturdy and straight, all the way to the shearing shed, Lord Edgerton said. *And hired me a clever sheepdog into the bargain. Is that not so, Pengallen?*

Just so, my lord. And George reached out to open the small brown leather box on the table.

"What is that thing?" Marie exclaimed, all apprehension.

"Do not be afraid," George told her, taking the coils of wire and the polished copper paddles from the box. "You will feel nothing beyond a slight tingling, if that." He flicked back a latch sealing an inner compartment of the box and produced a thin piece of ordinary slate, then took a small brush and bottle from the leather loops securing them to the box's inner lid and proceeded to paint the slate with a reeking, viscous emulsion. "When I have finished my preparations for the imager, I will summon your mother and Sir Hadrian. All will be conducted in an atmosphere of the strictest propriety and respect, I promise you."

Overcome by some inexplicable instinct, Marie leaned forward to shield her belly. "What do you mean to do?"

"Nothing that will hurt you." George smiled persuasively. "I have already employed this invention of mine many times in the best homes in London. I call it an imager, for it uses the principles of magnetism to detect the vital emanations of the fetus and translate these into an image of the same." Seeing her bewilderment, he explained, "It makes a picture of the contents of the womb."

George had to repeat his explanation shortly later, after he had recalled Madame Christophe and Sir Hadrian for the performance. He took pleasure in the way their eyes devoured the device, curiosity warring with confusion, but he did not allow this enjoyment to distract him. There was a certain deftness of hand required to bring the plan to fruition. The blank slate must be inserted into its proper compartment in such a way as to make it seem that he opened the identical compartment when the so-called imaging was accomplished. In fact he would open an entirely different slot within the box and extract an entirely—and significantly—different slate.

I wrote to Sir Hadrian, telling him that your device is near perfection. Lord Edgerton's phantom beamed in George's memory.

A pity it's a fraud, mused Dr. Toombs. *An invention like this would be in high demand, particularly by those much-traveled men who would be assured of their wives' honesty in matters of strapping babes born a mere six months after their return home.*

Sir Hadrian, in turn, confides in me his certainty that it will reveal Mademoiselle Christophe's embarrassment was conceived at a time when

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he was himself abroad, and thus—how did he put it?—"unhappily unable to supervise the girl's moral comportment," Lord Edgerton went on. *In other words, he expects your "invention" to clear him of all suspicion of paternity, and has hinted that he will become your patron in marketing the device should he be impressed by the results.*

Oh, he shall *be impressed by them, my lord,* George replied.

"It is done. You may remove the magnets." George fiddled with the useless knobs and switches cluttering the interior of the box while Madame Christophe withdrew the copper paddles which she had, until then, been holding to the sides of her daughter's belly. Sir Hadrian came forward to undo the small leather harnesses attaching the magnets to the paddles and carefully replaced them in their separate cases, as George had previously instructed him to do. "Now!" George pretended to undo the latch of the first compartment, but in truth touched the almost invisible button securing its brother and extracted the second slate. "Now we shall see how well developed this—*Dear God in heaven!*"

It was a fine performance if he did say so himself. The shock, the horror, the helpless manner in which he groped for words and at last could do no more than surrender the previously etched slate for Sir Hadrian's inspection.

"Merciful Lord," Sir Hadrian breathed, staring at the image of a creature half human, half equine, its brow already sprouting the nub of a horn.

"It is a monster," Madame Christophe cried, casting her arms around her daughter. "Oh, my poor child!"

"Nay, *madame,* it is a miracle," George corrected her. "A miracle which must be laid before the world."

"No, no, it must not." Sir Hadrian wrung his hands. "There must be some mistake."

"How can you doubt the evidence of your eyes?" George demanded.

"The evidence of an unproved device!" Sir Hadrian's face was flushed.

"Proof will come," George said. "The incontrovertible proof of birth. In the meanwhile, I must go back to London. This is the new *stupor mundi*; it must be made known." He made a great business of packing up the box.

"Stay." Sir Hadrian's grip on George's arm was astoundingly strong for a man of his years. "I tell you, we must keep this secret. Suppose your device is accurate? Suppose the girl gives birth to such a beast as its powers foretell? What then remains impossible? What man of science will then be able to stand against the army of charlatans that will arise, each claiming that they have conceived a whole menagerie of wonders? For every truth, a thousand Tofts, and reason trampled in the dust beneath their feet!"

"And if my invention's reading is proved wrong?" George inquired.

"After you have made your great noise of it in London?" Sir Hadrian was grim. "You know without my telling you: They will call you a fraud, and they will say the same of me."

"Oh, surely not!" George feigned alarm. "Your reputation—"

"Than which there is no more fragile thing."

"Sir, I sympathize, but I am, as you yourself have said, a man of science.

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I cannot in good conscience conceal this potential marvel from my colleagues. If there were some way by which I might assume full responsibility for the girl until the birth, dissociate her from you completely, I would do so, but I fear I lack the means." He spoke more and more rapidly, the goal in sight. Before half a dozen breaths he intended to persuade Sir Hadrian that Lord Edgerton might be willing to accept guardianship of the girl—and the fame or infamy attending the same—if only that small matter of a certain debt might possibly be . . .

He never got the chance. A scream of unearthly agony tore the air of the cottage. "*Mon Dieu!*" Madame Christophe exclaimed as her daughter's fingers dug into her arms and the girl's knees drew themselves up sharply to meet the now violently heaving curve of her belly.

"It can not be!" cried Sir Hadrian, gaping in horror at the girl's sudden labor. "Now? So soon? Dear heaven, are we to birth a monster?"

There was no time to answer him, whether or not he expected any answer. Marie's back arched, bending her spine like a bow. The force of the convulsion hurled her mother halfway across the room. George threw himself forward, vainly seeking to lay hold of the girl's thrashing limbs, only to have his ears riven by a shriek that climbed the rafters of the cottage. Then it was over almost as suddenly as it had begun. The shriek was cut off as if by a sword's blow. With a final shake, her body went limp. The room was still.

George knelt upon the bed beside the dead girl, gathering her to him, rags and bones. The hideous bulge of her belly was gone. She was hardly any burden in his arms.

"Look," said Madame Christophe quietly, coming up behind him. "Look there." At first George thought she meant that he must look at the bed itself, at the inexplicable absence of any stain upon the sheets save only the dampness of sweat. Then she reached past him, past Marie's eternity-fixed eyes, and tugged aside the hem of her daughter's crumpled nightdress.

The white thing that lay curled there, velvet muzzle half veiled by silken tail, was hardly bigger than a month-grown hound pup. It seemed to sense the weight of their stares, for it lifted up its head to confront them, cheeks still damp with a fluid that smelled of linden blossom and pine. Its eyes held every possibility but fear.

I am mad, George thought as, still cradling Marie's small corpse, he watched the shimmering spot upon the creature's brow slowly grow into the certainty of the starbright horn. *Oh, I* hope *that I am mad!*

With a hoarse, inarticulate cry, Sir Hadrian cast his full weight across the bed, seized the newborn creature by the base of the neck, and jerked the head back suddenly. There was a snap.

"There," he said, letting the dead thing fall against the sheets. He pushed himself off the bed and brushed off his hands with the air of a man well satisfied with a good day's work. "That's an end of it." He was still smoothing down his rumpled clothes when he became aware of the looks Madame Christophe and George were giving him. "Well?" he demanded, his face reddening. "Can such monsters live and this remain a rational world?"

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Madame Christophe opened her mouth as if she might desire to reply, but then she closed it and instead burst into tears. George hardly felt it when she took her daughter's body from his arms.

"You there," said Sir Hadrian. He nodded curtly at George. "When you return to London, you may tell Lord Edgerton that the poor girl died in childbed, her infant with her."

"Sir, I—"

"Moreover, in view of your services to me in a difficult time, I have elected to reward you generously, both for the use of your invention—imperfect though its properties have proved to be—as well as for your discretion. You will, I hope, likewise convey to Lord Edgerton my assurances that his own discretion will be equally appreciated. *And* acknowledged. To this end you will deliver to him a certain paper which I shall—"

George heard no more. Sir Hadrian's words buzzed in his ears like sun-drowsy bees. He gazed to where Madame Christophe sat rocking her child's dead body on her knees, then looked down upon the corpse of the creature to which the maiden had given life at the cost of her own. He wondered whether Sir Hadrian's chosen gods, Science and Reason, would ever yield anything half so beautiful.

Such monsters as he and I can live, he thought, watching as death filmed over the seablue eye of the unicorn, *and this remain a rational world.* He saw the gates of Bedlam yawn before him as he felt both the world and reason receding from him at a great rate. He laughed once, for the last time, and gladly let them go. O

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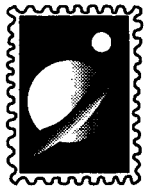

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THE CARD

Gene Wolfe

Michael Swanwick has stated, "Gene Wolfe is the greatest writer in the English language alive today. . . . Among living writers, there is nobody who can approach Gene Wolfe for brilliance of prose, clarity of thought, and depth in meaning." Mr. Wolfe was recently honored with the World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement. He's also recently completed *The Knight* and *The Wizard,* the two books of The Wizard Knight. Mr. Wolfe is currently working on *The Soldier of Sidon,* which will be the third book in the Soldier trilogy—including *The Soldier of the Mist* and *The Soldier of Arete*. Tor Books is the publisher of these novels. In addition to his many literary awards, Mr. Wolfe received the Combat Infantry Badge during the Korean War.

Augie was off duty and driving his own car. We had met at a few family parties—he was the husband of one of my older daughter's friends—and discovered that I enjoyed hearing his stories and he enjoyed hearing mine. We were driving through a pretty bad part of town when he pointed to a man about his age shuffling along the sidewalk.

"See that guy? He's going to damn me." Augie's voice was a little too casual.

"Cuss you out?" I already knew he half meant what he said, but it seemed better to play dumb.

"Hell, I've been cussed out by experts," Augie said. "You ought to hear my sergeant."

Half, I thought, *and maybe more than half.*

Here is the story, exactly as he told it.

His name's Wilhelm Boyd Anton, and he lived a couple of blocks down the street when we were kids. We called him Bill, or maybe Billyboy, which was what his mom called him. I kind of lost sight of him when we

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got a little older, because I went to the public high school, but I'd see him once in a while and say hi. Pretty soon he had a nice car and some good clothes, so I figured he was doing all right when I thought about him at all.

Years after that, I guess it was, somebody pulled him in. You saw those bandages on his arms. You had to. Maybe you noticed the one on his face, too. He'll pull them off by-and-by and get himself bleeding again. Or else find an old lamp or maybe a toaster in an alley, tear the cord off, and start beating himself with it. That's the stuff he does.

Crazy? That's what most people think. Me, I don't know. I only know he's going to do what I said. Push me over the edge and into Hell. He's the one. You didn't get a look at his eyes, did you?

I didn't think so. For a minute there I was thinking of giving him a lift so you could. Only he'd be in back and you'd be in front, so what's the use? And he'd have bled on my upholstery. He's done it a couple of times already. But when you look him in the eye you know. You know what you're seeing, and you know he's not some nut.

Want to know what happened to him? How he got to be like that?

Oh, he told me. He told me everything. About two years ago a couple of officers pulled him in. They had to, because he was on a bus cutting his arms and legs up with a piece of broken glass and getting blood on everybody. The driver saw their black-and-white and signaled them, and pulled over, so they went in and got him. They took the glass away and a paramedic patched him up, but he still made a hell of a mess out of their rear seat.

I'll tell you the truth. I didn't recognize him when they brought him in. He recognized me, I saw it in his face the way you do, but I didn't know who he was until we checked his ID. He'd lost maybe fifty pounds, and there were scars all over him, some pretty fresh.

What had happened to him, see, was that he had found a card. He'd seen it floating in the gutter and picked it up, thinking it was a baseball card or something. It was a holy card, like they give out in church sometimes, or else the Shrine of Our Lady sends you one. That kind of card. Old people used to be really big on them, but they went out of style when the rosary did and they've never really come back. You get a picture of Saint Francis or whoever on front and a prayer on the back.

Yeah, that's it. O holy Saint Whatever, thou art renowned for thy piety, teach me to . . . And so on and so forth. Only on the one he found it said *blessed* instead of *saint.* It means that the guy on the card has been beatified, just not canonized yet.

You don't see how finding a holy card could do that to somebody? I figured you wouldn't. It was the picture, okay? The picture on the front and the name, because it was him. They both were. He'd read the back before he really looked at the front, and it said Blessed Wilhelm Boyd Anton. When he saw that he turned it over and looked at the front in a good light. It was a painting by some artist, not a photo, but it was him, and he knew it. Him the way he'd looked when he was two or three years younger, maybe. Or maybe the way he'd have looked if he got a tan and lost a little weight. He was a married guy with a wife who loved

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him and two kids back then, you understand, starting to get fat and lose his hair.

Oh, he knew about doubles and all that. You're walking down the street, and you see somebody who looks exactly like you. But the same name? It was his name on the back, too. How many guys could there be named Wilhelm Boyd Anton who looked like him?

It bugged him for a while, I think maybe two or three months, then he read a book about anomalies. You know what an anomaly is?

Okay, suppose it's a homicide investigation. There's certain things you look for at the scene. Blood is one. And fingerprints, tire tracks, footprints, cartridge casings, and so forth. But there's another one that can tell you a lot, or leave you scratching your head. It's anomalies, things that shouldn't be where they are but are there anyway.

One case I read about they found a barrette, a clip a woman wears in her hair. It turned out a woman had killed the guy. Or there was a guy from Pakistan that had a little store over on Harvey. There was one of those tin boxes of snuff on the counter. The rest was behind the counter on a shelf you had to bend way down to reach. The perp chewed snuff, see, and he'd come into the store every few days to buy some. The Pakistani saw him come in and got out a fresh box for him. Only he shot him and rang up No Sale instead so he could get the money. We started asking around the neighborhood—who chewed snuff? And that was all there was to it.

Well this book was about anomalies, too, only it was about anomalies nobody could explain. Some hunter in Minnesota shoots a kangaroo. Where did it come from? Nobody's said anything about a missing kangaroo, and the guys at the zoo say it could never stand the winters.

Or here's another one. I've got a lot of them because after Billyboy told me about the book I got it out of the library, and it's full of them. A guy finds a pen in the post office. It's got the name of a store on it, a phone number, and the name of a town. He's never heard of the store or this town, and it's not in his map book. He dials the number and nothing. There's no ring, no dial tone, no recorded message. Nothing. The phone company says that can't happen, but it does.

The guy who wrote the book says that things like that are crossovers from another probability. Say I win the lottery next week. Okay, there's another world where I don't. It's not far from here, only we can't get there. Usually we can't, but sometimes we do. A guy's driving late at night. He's nearly out of gas when he sees one of those county gas stations where there's a little store attached and maybe two gas pumps. He pulls in, buys gas, maybe talks to the owner awhile. Only the next time he goes down that road there's no gas station there, and there's never a gas station there again.

The thing is, that gas he bought was real. The man took his money and the gas got him where he was going.

So that was the way Billyboy explained the card to himself, see? There was this other world, he'd been different there, and probably God had dealt him the card to show him how it could have been for him. If it had been you or me we would have done a lot of thinking about where we went wrong. I would have, and probably you're the same way. Was it this?

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Was it that? He didn't because he knew right off. There had been this one girl. I'm not going to tell you what he made her do, or how he made her do it. Not what she did trying to scrag herself afterward, either. All of it was as ugly as sin, and you know his name so you could probably find out who she was without too much trouble. Her family's still around. They don't want anybody to know, and I don't blame them.

That last part, the thing she did to herself, wasn't just ugly. It was messy. The thing was, it was supposed to do for her, only it didn't work very good. She stumbled around screaming and bleeding. She'd fall down, and he'd figure she was down for the count, but when he was trying to call nine one one she'd be up and grabbing him again, bleeding all over him and yelling that she wanted to die, he had to let her die.

Well, he got an ambulance, and he tried to patch her up before they came, and they tried and got her to the ER and all that. So he was trying to save her life, okay? He was doing everything he could think of to save her. Only he was hoping she'd die the whole time. That she'd die and it would all be over. Just get it over and bury her and clean up afterward and forget the whole damn thing. That was what he thought the whole time he was trying to help her.

They wouldn't let him see her once she was in the hospital. He wasn't a relative or anything, so they wouldn't let him in. That's the rule. He sat around in the waiting room until about two AM, and then she was getting up again, stumbling across the room to grab him, and it was all starting over.

Sure. He'd fallen asleep right there in the chair. He woke up yelling. He went home and fixed himself a stiff drink and went to bed. You want to guess what he saw?

Right. So the next day he phoned in sick, and cleaned himself up and went back to the hospital. They still wouldn't let him in. He tried a couple of dodges that didn't work, and went home; and that afternoon her brother phoned to say she'd died and he was coming over to beat the shit out of him. He told the brother okay, let him in, and never raised his hands. The brother punched him two or three times, knocked him down, and kicked him. And that was that. His face was marked up some, so he stayed away from work until it healed. He still had the dreams, only not very often. Then he found the card.

No, he didn't quit his job. They fired him. He'd cut himself up, you know. Beat himself. All that. Come in bleeding and stab his arms with anything sharp he could lay his hands on. He doesn't do that because he likes it, or to punish himself either. He does it to get his mind off what he did and what happened afterward. He's repented and confessed and all that, but he can't stop thinking about it. The place where he worked got a shrink to check him out. I don't know what the shrink told them and neither does he, only nothing the shrink said to him did any good. You want to talk to him?

I didn't think so. I said that because he'd tell you how it will end. He knows, see? He's talked to God about it and talked to some angels about it, and talked to Father Mike down at Saint Scholastica's about it. And he knows. He told Father Mike and he told me. Father Mike and me get to-

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gether every so often and compare notes, and it's the same. He knows how it's going to end, and I'm the one that's going to end it.

Hell's bells! Did I ask you if you wanted to know? I know you don't. Neither do I, but I know and it's eating me up. Have a little charity, for Christ's sake. Let me get this off my chest.

He's still got the card, see? He carries it around with him all the time. One of these days he's going to show it to me. He'll pull it out and make me look at his picture, make me read the back. I'll do it, only when I look at the picture I'll say, "Billyboy, that's not you." And when I read the back I'll read out some made-up name. Then I'll show him a mirror, make him look at himself in the mirror and hold up the card next to his face, and I'll say, "See, Billyboy? See how different this guy looks?"

And he'll die. That and all the cutting and whipping and stabbing will be punishment enough for him, for every bad thing he ever did, her included. He won't be beatified here—or he doesn't think he will. Father Mike's not so sure about that. But he'll be a saint in Heaven, and she'll meet him there. They'll kiss and she'll forgive him for everything, then and forever.

Only I'll die and be damned and never get out.

Because of the lie. Because when I say it isn't him and pretend to read the made-up name I'll be lying through my teeth. O

DESTINATION

My cab driver claims to be one of the 90,000 angels of destruction. "Look," he says, rattling his bracelet (it is shaped like a manacle with a few dangling links; I had assumed he was into S&M). "This is real adamant, forged in the furnace of Satan's mouth, worked on the anvil of his jaw."

I think about bailing out when he slows down for the next light, but this is a strange city, and I hesitate too long.

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"I'm retired" he says. "but I
still freelance sometimes." His voice
is a smooth baritone, sonic caramel.
He looks to be about twenty-five, with a passé haircut
and a strong nose
"Ah," I say.
mouth, worked on the anvil of his
jaw."
This yellow cab is a fitting chariot for an angel
of destruction—it is the vehicular
equivalent of a sheet of paper crumpled
into a ball and then smoothed out again,.
all dents from roof to fenders.
"I didn't pick you
up by accident," the driver says. "There is a plan,
but—"
You can let me off at the next light,"
I say. "We're almost there."

"Dis is your destination," he mutters.

"What?" I say, clutching my little
suitcase.
He stops the cab, turns his head.
His front teeth are (somehow) carved
into little skulls.
"This," he says, over-
enunciating, showing me the raw end
of his wounded tongue. "This is your
destination."
I throw money at him,
jump out, slam the door. He speeds away
and I stand, swaying, on the street,
watching his taillights burn.
I never
see the truck coming toward me,
but I feel it when it hits.

—Tim Pratt

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TK'TK'TK

David D. Levine

David D. Levine's story "The Tale of the Golden Eagle" was a nominee for last year's Hugo Award. He's also a Writers of the Future Contest winner (2002), James White Award winner (2001), and Clarion West graduate (2000). Mr. Levine has sold stories to *F&SF, Realms of Fantasy,* and several anthologies, including two *Year's Best* volumes and Mike Resnick's *New Voices in Science Fiction.* The author lives in Portland, Oregon, where he and his wife, Kate Yule, produce the fanzine *Bento.* His web page can be found at *www.BentoPress.com.* Mr. Levine's tale of a distraught salesman light years from home is his first story for *Asimov's.*

Walker's voice recorder was a beautiful thing of aluminum and plastic, hard and crisp and rectangular. It sat on the waxy countertop, surrounded by the lumpy excreted-looking products of the local technology. *Unique selling proposition,* he thought, and clutched the leather handle of his grandfather's briefcase as though it were a talisman.

Shkthh pth kstphst, the shopkeeper said, and Walker's hypno-implanted vocabulary provided a translation: "What a delightful object." Chitinous fingers picked up the recorder, scrabbling against the aluminum case with a sound that Walker found deeply disturbing. "What does it do?"

It took him a moment to formulate a reply. Even with hypno, *Thfshpfth* was a formidably complex language. "It listens and repeats," he said. "You talk all day, it remembers all. Earth technology. Nothing like it for light-years." The word for "light-year" was *hkshkhthskht,* difficult to pronounce. He hoped he'd gotten it right.

"Indeed yes, most unusual." The pink frills, or gills, at the sides of the alien's head throbbed. It did not look down—its faceted eyes and neckless head made that impossible—but Walker judged its attention was on the recorder and not on himself. Still, he kept smiling and kept looking the alien in the eyes with what he hoped would be interpreted as a sincere expression.

"Such a unique object must surely be beyond the means of such a humble one as myself," the proprietor said at last. *Sthshsk,* such-a-humble-

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one-as-myself—Walker could die a happy man if he never heard those syllables again.

Focus on value, not price. "Think how useful," he hissed in reply. "Never forget things again." He wasn't sure you could use *htpthtk,* "things," in that way, but he hoped it got the point across.

"Perhaps the honored visitor might wish to partake of a cup of *thshsh?*"

Walker's smile became rigid. *Thshsh* was a beverage nearly indistinguishable from warm piss. But he'd learned that to turn down an offer of food or drink would bring negotiations to an abrupt close. "This-humble-one-accepts-your-most-generous-offer," he said, letting the memorized syllables flow over his tongue.

He examined the shopkeeper's stock as it prepared the drink. It all looked like the products of a sixth-grade pottery class, irregular clots of brown and gray. But the aliens' biotech was far beyond Earth's—some of these lumps would be worth thousands back home. Too bad he had no idea which ones. His expertise lay elsewhere, and he was here to sell, not buy.

The shopkeeper itself was a little smaller than most of its kind, about a hundred forty centimeters tall, mostly black, with yellow spine-tips and green eyes. Despite its insectile appearance, it was warm-blooded—under its chitin it had bones and muscle and organs not unlike Walker's own. But its mind and culture were even stranger than its disturbing mouth- parts.

"The cup of friendship," the alien said, offering a steaming cup of *thshsh.* Walker suppressed a shudder as his fingers touched the alien's—warm, covered with fine hairs, and slightly sticky—but he nodded politely and raised the cup to his lips.

He sipped as little as he felt he could politely get away with. It was still vile.

"Very good," he said.

Forty-five minutes later the conversation finally returned to the voice recorder. "Ownership of this most wondrous object is surely beyond price. Perhaps the honored guest would be willing to lend it for a short period?"

"No trial period necessary. Satisfaction is guaranteed." He was taking a risk with that, he knew, but the recorder had never failed him in all the years he'd owned it.

Tk'tk'tk, the alien said, tapping its mouthparts together. There was no translation for that in Walker's vocabulary. He wanted to throttle the thing—couldn't it even stick to its own language?—but he struggled not to show his impatience.

After a pause, the alien spread a hand—a gesture that meant nothing to Walker. "Perhaps the honored owner could be compensated for the temporary use of the property."

"Humbly requesting more details."

"A loan of this type is generally for an indefinite period. The compensation is, of course, subject to negotiation. . . ."

"You make offer?" he interrupted. He realized that he was not being as polite as he could be. But it was already late afternoon, and he hadn't eaten since breakfast—and if he didn't conclude this deal successfully he might not have enough money for lunch.

Tk'tk'tk again. "Forty-three," it said at last.

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Walker seethed at the offer. He had hoped to sell the recorder for enough to live on for at least a week, and his hotel alone—barely worthy of the name—cost twenty-seven a night. But he had already spent most of a day trying to raise some cash, and this was the only concrete offer he'd gotten.

"Seventy?"

The alien's gills, normally in constant slight motion, stopped. Walker knew he had offended it somehow, and his heart sank. But his smile never wavered.

"Seventy is a very inopportune number. To offer seventy to one of your exalted status would be a great insult."

Damn these aliens and their obscure numerology! Walker began to sputter an apology.

"Seventy-three, on the other hand," the shopkeeper continued, "is a number with an impeccable lineage. Would the honored guest accept compensation in this amount?"

He was so busy trying to apologize that he almost didn't recognize the counter-offer for what it was. But some salesman's instinct, some fragment of his father's and his grandfather's DNA, noticed it, and he managed to hiss out "This-humble-one-accepts-your-most-generous-offer" before he got in any more trouble.

It took another hour before the shopkeeper actually counted the money—soft brown lumps like rabbit droppings, each looking exactly like the others—into Walker's hand. He passed his reader over them; it smelled the lumps and told him they were three seventeens, two nines, and a four, totaling seventy-three as promised. He sorted them into different pockets so he wouldn't accidentally give the luggage-carrier a week's salary as a tip again. It angered him to be dependent on the Chokasti-made reader, but he would rather use alien technology than try to read the aliens' acrid pheromonal "writing" with his own nose.

Walker pressed through the labia of the shop entrance into the heat and noise and stink of the street. Hard orange shafts of dusty late-afternoon sun glinted dully on the scuttling carapaces of the populace: little merchants and bureaucrats, big laborers and warriors, hulking mindless transporters. No cars, no autoplanes . . . just a rustling mass of aliens, chuttering endlessly in their harsh sibilant language, scraping their hard spiny limbs and bodies against each other and the rounded, gourd-like walls. Here and there a knot of two or three in conversation blocked traffic, which simply clambered over them. The aliens had no concept of personal space.

Once a swarm of juveniles had crawled right over *him*—a nightmare of jointed legs and chitinous bodies, and a bitter smell like rusty swamp water. They had knocked his briefcase from his hand, and he had scrambled after it under the scrabbling press of their bodies. He shuddered at the memory—not only did the briefcase contain his most important papers, it had belonged to his grandfather. His father had given it to him when he graduated from college.

He clutched his jacket tight at his throat, gripped his briefcase firmly under his arm, and shouldered through the crowd.

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* * *

Walker sat in the waiting room of his most promising prospect—to be blunt, his *only* prospect—a manufacturer of building supplies whose name translated as Amber Stone. Five days in transit, eight weeks in this bug-infested hellhole of a city, a fifteen-megabyte database of contacts from five different species, and all he had to show for it was one lousy stinking customer. *Potential* customer at that . . . it hadn't signed anything yet. But Walker had been meeting with it every couple of days for two weeks, and he was sure he was right on the edge of a very substantial sale. All he had to do was keep himself on site and on message.

The light in the palm-sized windows shaded from orange to red before Amber Stone finally appeared from its inner office. "Ah, human! So very pleased that you honor such a humble one as myself with your delightful presence." The aliens couldn't manage the name "Walker," and even "human" came out more like *hsshp'k*.

"Honor is mine, Amber Stone. You read information I give you, three days?"

"Most intriguing, yes. Surely no finer literature has ever been produced."

"You have questions?"

Questions it did have, yes indeed, no end of questions—who performed the translation, where did you have it reproduced, is it really as cold there as they say, did you come through Pthshksthpt or by way of Sthktpth . . . but no questions about the product. *I'm building rapport with the customer,* Walker thought grimly, and kept up his end of the conversation as best he could.

Finally Walker tried to regain control. "Your business, it goes well?"

Tk'tk'tk, the customer said, and placed its hands on its shoulders. "As the most excellent guest must surely have noticed, the days are growing longer."

Walker had no idea what that might mean. "Good business or bad, always need for greater efficiency."

"The honored visitor graces this humble one with the benefits of a unique perspective."

Though the sweat ran down behind his tie, Walker felt as though he were sliding on ice—his words refusing to gain traction. "My company's software will improve inventory management efficiency and throughput by three hundred percent or more," he said, pulling out one of his best memorized phrases.

"Alas, your most marvelous software is surely so far superior to our humble computers that no accommodation could be made."

"We offer complete solution. Hardware, software, support. Fully compatible. Satisfaction guaranteed." Walker smiled, trying to project confidence—no, not just confidence, *love,* for the product.

Tk'tk'tk. Was that an expression of interest? "Most intriguing, yes. Most unique. Alas, sun is setting." It gestured to the windows, which had faded from red to nearly black. "This most humble one must beg the honored visitor's forgiveness for consuming so much valuable time."

"Is no problem. . . ."

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"This one would not dream of insulting an honored guest in such a way. Please take your rest now, and honor this unworthy establishment with your esteemed presence again tomorrow." The alien turned and vanished into the inner office.

Walker sat and seethed. *Dismissed by a bug,* he thought, *how much lower can you sink?* He stared into the scuffed leather surface of his briefcase as though he'd find the answer there. But it just sat on his lap, pressing down with the hard-edged weight of two generations of successful salesmen.

Though the sun had set, the street was still oppressively hot and still teemed with aliens. The yellow-green bioluminescent lighting made them look even stranger, more unnatural. Walker clutched his grandfather's briefcase to his chest as the malodorous crowd bumped and jostled him, spines catching on his clothing and hair.

It didn't help his attitude that he was starving. He'd left most of his lunch on the plate, unable to stomach more than a few wriggling bites, and that had been hours ago. He hoped he'd be able to find something more palatable for dinner, but he wasn't very optimistic. It seemed so cruel of the universe to make travelers find food when they were hungry.

But then, drifting between the sour and acrid smells of the bustling street, Walker's nose detected a warm, comforting smell, something like baked potatoes. He wandered up and down the street, passing his reader over pheromone-lines on the walls advertising SUPERLATIVE CHITIN-WAX and BLUE RIVER MOLT-FEVER INSURANCE. Finally, just as he was coming to the conclusion the smell was a trick of his homesick mind, the reader's tiny screen told him he had arrived at the SPIRIT OF LIFE VEGETARIAN RESTAURANT.

He hadn't even known the *Thfshpfth* language had the concept "vegetarian." But whatever it was, it certainly smelled good. He pushed through the restaurant's labia.

The place was tiny and low-ceilinged, with a single low, curving counter and five squatting-posts. Only one of the posts was occupied, by a small brown alien with white spine-tips and red eyes. It sat quietly, hands folded on the counter, in an attitude that struck Walker as contemplative. No staff was in evidence.

Walker chose a post, placed his folded jacket on it as a cushion, and seated himself as comfortably as possible. His space at the counter had the usual indentation, into which his order would be ladled, and was equipped with a double-ended spoon, an ice-pick, a twisty implement whose use he had yet to decipher, and a small bowl of water (which, he had learned to his great embarrassment, was for washing the fingertips, not drinking). But there was no menu.

Menus were one of the most frustrating things about this planet. Most of the items listed on the pheromone-tracked planks were not in his reader's vocabulary, and for the rest the translations were inadequate—how was he supposed to know whether or not "land-crab in the northern style" was something he would find edible? Time and again he had gone hungry, offended the server, or both. Even so, menus were something he un-

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derstood. He had no idea what to order, or even how, without a menu to point at.

He drummed his fingers on the countertop and fidgeted while he waited for the server to appear. Say what you like about these creatures, they were unfailingly polite, and prompt. Usually. But not here, apparently. Finally, frustrated, he got up to leave. But as he was putting on his jacket, trying to steel himself for the crowd outside, he caught another whiff of that baked-potato smell. He turned back to the other customer, still sitting quietly. "No menu. No server. Hungry. How order?"

The alien did not turn. "Sit quietly. With peace comes fulfillment." Its voice was a low susurration, not as harsh as most of the others he'd heard.

With peace comes fulfillment? Walker opened his mouth for a sarcastic reply, but found his grammar wasn't up to the task. And he was hungry. And the food smelled good. So he took off his jacket and sat down again.

He sat with back straight and hands folded, staring at the swirled brown and cream colors of the wall in front of him. It might have come from Amber Stone's factory, produced by a huge genetically modified life form that ate garbage and shat building supplies. He tried not to think about it too much . . . the aliens' biotechnology made him queasy.

Looking at the wall, he thought about what it would take to sell Amber Stone's products on Earth. They couldn't be any more incomprehensible to him than the software he had been sent here to sell, and as his father always said, "a good salesman can sell anything." Though with three failed jobs and a failed marriage behind him, he was no longer sure that description had ever really fit him. No matter, he was too old to change careers now. The most he could hope for now was to stay alive until he could afford to retire. Get off the treadmill, buy a little house in the woods, walk the dog, maybe go fishing. . . .

Walker's reverie was interrupted when the other customer rose from its squatting-post and walked around the counter to stand in front of him. "Greetings," it said. "This one welcomes the peaceful visitor to the Spirit of Life."

Walker sputtered. "You . . . you server?"

"All serve the Spirit of Life, well or poorly, whether they understand it or not. This one serves food as well. The visitor is hungry?"

"Yes!" Walker's head throbbed. Was the alien laughing at him?

"Then this one will bring food. When peace is attained, satisfaction follows." It vanished through the door behind the counter.

Walker fumed, but he tried to wait peacefully. Soon the alien returned with a steaming pot, and ladled out a portion into the indentation in front of Walker. It looked like chunks of purple carrot and pale-yellow potato in a saffron-colored sauce, and it smelled wonderful. It tasted wonderful, too. A little strange, maybe—the purple carrots were bitter and left an odd aftertaste—but it had a complex flavor and was warm and filling. Walker spooned up every bit of it.

"Very good," he said to the server, which had returned to its previous station in front of the counter. "How much?"

It spread its hands and said "This establishment serves the Spirit of

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Life. Any donation would be appropriate." It pointed to a glass jar on the counter, which contained a small pile of money.

Walker considered. How much of his limited funds could he spare? Yesterday's lunch had cost him five and a half. This place, and the food, were much plainer. But it was the single best meal he had eaten in weeks. Finally he chose a seven from his pocket, scanned it with his reader to make sure, and dropped it in the jar.

"This one thanks the peaceful guest. Please return."

Walker gave an awkward little bow, then pushed through the restaurant's labia into the nightmare of the street.

Walker waved his room key, a twisted brown stick reeking with complex pheromones, at the hotel desk clerk. "Key no work," he said. "No let me in."

The clerk took the key, ran its fingers over it to read the codes. "Ah. Yes. This most humble one must apologize. *Fthshpk* starts tomorrow."

"What is *Fthshpk?*"

"Ah. Yes. This humble one has been so unkind as to forget that the most excellent guest is not familiar with the poor customs of this humble locale. *Fthshpk* is a religious political holiday. A small and insignificant celebration by our guest's most elevated standards, to be sure."

"So why it not work, the key?"

"Humble though it may be, *Fthshpk* is very important to the poor folk of the outlying regions. They come to the city in great numbers. This humble room has long been promised to such as these. And surely the most honored guest does not wish to share it?"

"No. . . ." The room was tiny enough for Walker alone. And he didn't want to find out how some of the equipment in the toilet-room was used.

"Indeed. So this most humble establishment, in a poor attempt to satisfy the most excellent human guest, has moved the guest's belongings to another room." It held out a new key, identical in appearance to the old one.

Walker took the key. "Where is?"

"Three levels down. Most cozy and well-protected."

The new room was larger than the old one, having two separate antechambers of unknown function. But the rounded ceiling was terribly low—though Walker could stand up straight in the middle of the room, he had to crouch everywhere else—and the lighting was dim, the heat and humidity desperately oppressive, and everything in the room stank of the aliens.

He lay awake for hours, staring into the sweltering darkness.

In the morning, he discovered that his shaver and some other things had vanished in the move. When he complained at the front desk, he got nothing but effusive, meaningless praise—oh yes, the most wonderful guest must be correct, our criminal staff is surely at fault—and a bill for the previous night's stay.

"Three hundred eighty-three!"

"The usual *Fthshpk* rate for our highest-quality suite is five hundred

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sixty-one. This most inadequate establishment has already offered a substantial reduction, out of respect for the highly esteemed guest and the unfortunate circumstances."

"Highest-quality suite? Too hot! Too dark! Too low!"

"Ah. Yes. The most excellent guest has unique tastes. Alas, this poor room is considered the most preferential in the hotel. The heat and light are praised by our other, sadly unenlightened, customers. These most lowly ones find it comforting."

"I not have so much money. You take interstellar credit? Bank draft?"

The clerk's gills stopped pulsing and it drew back a step, going *tk'tk'tk*. "Surely this humble one has misheard the most honored guest, for to offer credit during *Fthshpk* would be a most grave insult."

Walker licked his lips. Though the lobby was sweltering hot, suddenly he felt chilled. "Can pay after holiday?" He would have to find some other source of local currency.

Tk'tk'tk. "If the most honored visitor will please be patient. . . ." The clerk vanished.

Walker talked with the front desk manager, the chief hotelier, and the *thkfsh,* whatever that was, but behind the miasma of extravagant politeness was a cold hard wall of fact: he would pay for the room, he would pay in cash, and he would pay now.

"This establishment extends its most sincere apologies for the honored guest's unfortunate situation," said the *thkfsh,* which was dark yellow with green spine-tips and eyes. "However, even in this most humble city, payment for services rendered is required by both custom and law."

Walker had already suffered from the best the city had to offer—he was terrified of what he might find in the local jail. "I no have enough money. What can I do?"

"Perhaps the most honored guest would consider temporarily lending some personal possessions to the hotel?"

Walker remembered how he had sold his voice recorder. "Lend? For indefinite period?"

Tk'tk'tk. "The honored guest is most direct and forthright."

Walker thought about what they might want that he could spare. Not his phone, or his reader. "Interest in clothes? Shoes?"

"The highly perceptive guest will no doubt have noticed that the benighted residents of this city have not yet learned to cover themselves in this way."

Walker sighed, and opened his briefcase. Mostly papers, worthless or confidential or both. "Paper fastening device," he said, holding up his stapler. "Earth technology. Nothing like it for sixty-five light years."

"Surely such an item is unique and irreplaceable," said the *thkfsh*. "To accept the loan of this fine device would bring shame upon this humble establishment. However, the traveling-box . . ."

"Not understanding."

The *thkfsh* touched the scuffed leather of Walker's briefcase. "This traveling-box. It is most finely made."

Walker's chest tightened. "This humble object . . . only a box. Not worth anything."

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"The surface has a most unusual and sublime flavor. And the texture is unlike anything this unworthy one has touched."

Desperately, Walker dug under papers for something, anything else. He found a pocket umbrella. "This, folding rain-shield. Most useful. Same technology used in expanding solar panels."

"The honored visitor's government would surely object to the loan of such sensitive technology. But the traveling-box is, as the visitor says, only a box. Its value and interest to such a humble one as myself are far greater than its value to the exalted guest."

Walker's fingernails bit into his palms. "Box has . . . personal value. Egg-parent's egg-parent used it."

"How delightful! For the temporary loan of such a fine and significant object, this establishment might be willing to forgive the most worthy visitor's entire debt."

It's only a briefcase, Walker thought. It's not worth going to jail for. But his eyes stung as he emptied it out and placed its contents in a cheap extruded carry-bag.

Unshaven, red-eyed, Walker left the hotel carrying all his remaining possessions: a suitcase full of clothes and the carry-bag. He had less than a hundred in cash in his pockets, and no place to spend the night.

Harsh sunlight speared into his eyes from a flat blue sky. Even at this hour of the morning, the heat was already enough to make sweat spring from his skin. And the streets swarmed with aliens—more of them, in greater variety, and more excited than he had ever seen before.

A group of five red-and-black laborers, each over two and a half meters tall, waded through the crowd singing—or at least chattering rhythmically in unison. A swarm of black juveniles crawled over them in the opposite direction, flinging handfuls of glittering green rings into the air. All around, aliens large and small spun in circles, waving their hands in the air. Some pounded drums or wheedled on high-pitched flutes.

A yellow merchant with black spines grabbed Walker's elbows and began spinning the two of them around, colliding with walls and with other members of the crowd. The merchant chattered happily as they spun, but its words were lost in the maelstrom of sound that surrounded them. "Let go! Let go!" Walker shouted, clutching his suitcase and his bag as he tried to squirm away, but the merchant couldn't hear—or wasn't listening—and its chitinous hands were terribly strong.

Finally Walker managed to twist out of the merchant's grasp, only to spin away and collide with one of the hulking laborers. Its unyielding spines tore Walker's jacket.

The laborer stopped chanting and turned to face Walker. It grasped his shoulders, turned him side to side. "What are you?" it shouted. Its breath was fetid.

"Visitor from Earth," Walker shouted back, barely able to hear himself.

The laborer called to its companions, which had moved on through the crowd. They fought their way back, and the five of them stood around him, completely blocking the light.

"This one is a visitor from *h'th,*" said the first laborer.

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One of the others grabbed a handful of green rings from a passing juvenile, scattered them over Walker's head and shoulders. They watched him expectantly.

"Thank you?" he said. But that didn't seem to be what they wanted.

The first laborer cuffed Walker on the shoulder, sending him reeling into one of the others. "The visitor is not very polite," it said. The aliens loomed close around him.

"This-most-humble-one-begs-the-honored-one's-forgiveness," Walker chattered out, clutching the carry-bag to his chest, wishing for the lost solidity of his grandfather's briefcase. But the laborers ignored his apology and began to twirl him around, shouting in unison.

After a few dozen spins he made out the words of the chant: "Rings, dance! Rings, dance!" Desperately, not at all sure he was doing the right thing, he tried to dance in circles as he had seen some of the aliens do.

The laborers pulled the bag from Walker's hands and began to stomp their feet. "Rings, dance! Rings, dance!" Walker waved his arms in the air as he spun, chanting along with them. His breath came in short pants, destroying his pronunciation.

He twirled, gasping "rings, dance," until he felt the hot sun on his head, and twirled a while longer until he understood what that sun meant: the laborers, and their shade, had deserted him. He was spinning for no reason, in the middle of a crowd that took no notice. He stopped turning and dropped his arms, weaving with dizziness and relief. But the relief lasted only a moment—sudden panic seized him as he realized his arms were empty.

There was the carry-bag, just a meter away, lying in the dirt surrounded by chitinous alien feet. He plowed through the crowd and grabbed it before it got too badly stomped.

But though he searched for an hour, he never found the suitcase.

Walker leaned, panting, against the outside wall of Amber Stone's factory. He had fought through the surging streets for hours, hugging the bag to his chest under his tightly buttoned jacket, to reach this point. Again and again he had been sprinkled with green rings and had danced in circles, feeling ridiculous, but not wanting to find out what might happen if he refused. He was hot and sweaty and filthy.

The still-damp pheromone line drawn across the office's labia read CLOSED FOR *FTHSHPK*.

Walker covered his face with his hands. Sobs thick as glue clogged the back of his throat, and he stood with shoulders heaving, not allowing himself to make a sound. The holiday crowd streamed past like a river of blackberry vines.

Eventually he recovered his composure and blew his nose, patting his waist as he pocketed the sodden handkerchief. His money belt, with the two hard little rectangles of his passport and return ticket, was still in place. All he had to do was walk to the transit gate, and he could return home—with nothing to show for his appallingly expensive trip. But he still had his papers, his phone, and his reader, and his one prospective customer. It was everything he needed to succeed, as long as he didn't give up.

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"I might have lost your briefcase, Grandpa," he said aloud in English, "but I'm not going to lose the sale."

A passing juvenile paused at the odd sound, then continued on with the rest of the crowd.

Walker would never have believed he'd be glad to see anything on this planet, but his relief when he entered the Spirit of Life Vegetarian Restaurant was palpable. The city's tortuous streets had been made even more incomprehensible by the *Fthshpk* crowds, and he had begun to doubt he would ever find it, or that it would be open on the holiday. He had been going in entirely the wrong direction when he had found the address by chance, on the pheromone-map at a nearby intersection.

"How long *Fthshpk?*" he asked the server, once he had eaten. It was the same server as before, brown with white spine-tips; it stood behind the counter, hands folded on its thorax, in a centered and imperturbable stance.

"One day," it replied. "Though some believe the spirit of *Fthshpk* should be felt in every heart all year long."

Walker suppressed a shudder at the thought. "Businesses open tomorrow?"

"Most of them, yes. Some trades take an extended holiday."

"Building supplies?" Walker's anxiety made him sputter the word.

"They will be open." The server tilted its shoulders, a posture that seemed to convey amusement. "The most honored visitor is perhaps planning a construction project?"

"No." He laughed weakly, a sound that startled the server. "Selling, not buying."

"The visitor is a most intriguing creature." The server's shoulders returned to the horizontal. "This humble one wishes to help, but does not know how."

"This one seeks business customers. The server knows manufacturers? Inventory controllers? Enterprise resource management specialists?"

"The guest's words are in the *Thfshpfth* language, but alas, this one does not understand them."

"To apologize. Very specialized business."

The server lowered itself smoothly, bringing its face down to Walker's level. Its gills moved like seaweed in a gentle current. "Business problems are not this one's strength. Is the honored visitor having troubles with family?"

It took Walker a moment to formulate his response. "No. Egg-parent, brood-parent deceased. This one no egglings. Brood-partner . . . departed." For a moment he forgot who, or what, he was talking to. "This one spent too much time away from nest. Brood-partner found another egg-partner." He fell silent, lost in memory.

The server stood quietly for a moment, leaving Walker to his thoughts. After a while it spoke: "It is good to share these stories. Undigested stories cause pain."

"Thanking you."

"This humble one is known as Shining Sky. If the visitor wishes to

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share further stories, please return to this establishment and request this one by name."

When Walker left the Spirit of Life, the sun had already set. The *Fthshpk* crowds had thinned, with just a few revelers still dancing and twirling under the yellow-green street lights, so Walker was relatively unimpeded as he walked to hotel after hotel. Alas, they all said, this humble one apologizes most profusely, no room for the most honored visitor. Finally, exhausted, he found a dark space between buildings. Wrapping his jacket around the carry-bag, he placed it under his head—as a pillow, and for security. He would grab a few hours' sleep and meet with his customer the first thing in the morning.

He slept soundly until dawn, when the first hot light of day struck his face. He squinted and rolled over, then awoke fully at the sensation of the hard alley floor under his head.

The bag was not there.

He sat up, wide-eyed, but his worst fears were confirmed: his jacket and bag were nowhere to be seen. Panicked, he felt at his waist—his passport and return ticket were safe. But his money, his papers, his phone, and his reader were gone.

"Ah, human!" said Amber Stone. "Once again the most excellent visitor graces this unworthy establishment." It was late in the morning. Robbed of street signs, addresses, and maps by the loss of his reader, Walker had wandered the streets for hours in search of the factory. Without the accustomed weight of his briefcase, he felt as though he might blow away on the next breeze.

"You requested I come yesterday," Walker hissed. "I come, factory closed. Come again today. Very important." Even without the papers from his briefcase, he could still get a verbal commitment, or at least a strong expression of interest . . . some tiny tidbit of achievement to prove to his company, his father, his grandfather, and himself that he wasn't a complete loss.

"Surely the superlative guest has more important appointments than to meet with this insignificant one?"

"No. Amber Stone is most important appointment. Urgent we discuss purchase of software."

"This groveling one extends the most sincere apologies for occupying the exalted guest's time, and will not delay the most highly esteemed one any further." It turned to leave.

"This-most-humble-one-begs-the-honored-one's-forgiveness!"

Amber Stone spoke without turning back. "One who appears at a merchant's establishment filthy, staggering, and reeking of *Fthshpk*-rings is obviously one whose concerns are so exalted as to be beyond the physical plane. Such a one should not be distracted from its duties, which are surely incomprehensible to mere mortals."

Walker's shoulders slumped in defeat, but then it was as though he heard his father's voice in his inner ear: *Ask for the sale*. Walker swallowed, then said "Would the honored Amber Stone accept indefinite loan of inventory management system from this humble merchant?"

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The alien paused at the threshold of its inner office, then turned back to Walker. "If that is what the most exalted one desires, this simple manufacturer must surely pay heed. Would fifty-three million be sufficient compensation for the loan of a complete system?"

Stunned, Walker leaned against the wall. It was warm and rounded, and throbbed slightly. "Yes," he said at last. "Yes. Sufficient."

"Where the hell have you been, Walker? Your phone's been offline for days. And you look like shit." Gleason, Walker's supervisor, didn't look very good himself—his face on the public phone's oval screen was discolored and distorted by incompatibilities between the alien and human systems.

"I've been busy." He inserted Amber Stone's data-nodule into the phone's receptor.

Gleason's eyes widened as the contract came up on his display. "Yes you have! This is great!"

"Thanks." Gleason's enthusiasm could not penetrate the shell of numbness around Walker's soul. Whatever joy he might have felt at making the sale had been drowned by three days of negotiations.

"This will make you the salesman of the quarter! And the party's tomorrow night!"

The End-of-Quarter party. He thought of the bluff and facile faces of his fellow salesmen, the loutish jokes and cheap congratulations of every other EOQ he'd ever attended. Would it really be any different if his name was the one at the top of the list? And then to return to his empty apartment, and go out the next day to start a new quarter from zero. . . .

"Sorry," Walker said, "I can't make it."

"That's right, what am I thinking? It's gotta be at least a five day trip, with all the transfers. Look, give me a call whenever you get in. You got my home number?"

"It's in my phone." Wherever that was.

"Okay, well, I gotta go. See you soon."

He sat in the dim, stuffy little booth for a long time. The greenish oval of the phone screen looked like a pool of stagnant water, draining slowly away, reflecting the face of a man with no family, no dog, no little house in the woods. And though he might be the salesman of the quarter today, there were a lot of quarters between here and retirement, and every one of them would be just as much work.

Eventually came the rap of chitinous knuckles on the wall of the booth, and a voice. "This most humble one begs the worthy customer's forgiveness. Other customers desire to use the phone."

The booth cracked open like a seed pod. Walker stuck out his head, blinking at the light, and the public phone attendant said "Ah, most excellent customer. This most unworthy one trusts your call went well?"

"Yes. Most well."

"The price of the call is two hundred sixty-three."

Walker had about six in cash in his pants pockets. The rest had vanished with his jacket. He thought a moment, then dug in his money belt and pulled out a tiny plastic rectangle.

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"What is this?"

"Ticket to Earth."

"An interstellar transit ticket? To Earth? Surely this humble one has misheard."

"Interstellar. To Earth."

"This is worth thousands!"

"Yes." Then, in English, he said "Keep the change."

He left the attendant sputtering in incomprehension behind him.

The man was cursing the heat and the crowds as he pushed through the restaurant's labia from the street, but when he saw Walker he stopped dead and just gaped for a moment. "Jesus!" he said at last, in English. "I thought I was the only human being on this Godforsaken planet."

Walker was lean and very tan; his salt-and-pepper hair and beard were long but neatly combed, and he stood with folded hands in an attitude of centered harmony. He wore only a short white skirt. "Greetings," he said in the *Thfshpfth* language, as he always did. "This one welcomes the peaceful visitor to the Spirit of Life."

"What are you doing here?" The English words were ludicrously loud and round.

Walker tapped his teeth together, making a sound like *tk'tk'tk,* before he replied in English: "I am . . . serving food." The sound of it tickled his mouth.

"On this planet, I mean."

"I live here."

"But why did you come here? And why the Hell did you stay?"

Walker paused for a moment. "I came to sell something. It was an Earth thing. The people here didn't need it. After a while I understood, and stopped trying. I've been much happier since." He gestured to one of the squatting-posts. "Please seat yourself."

"I, uh . . . I think I'll pass."

"You're sure? The *thksh hspthk* is very good today."

"Thanks, but no." The man turned to go, but then he paused, pulled some money from his pocket, ran a reader over it. "Here," he said, handing it to Walker. "Good luck."

As the restaurant's labia closed behind the visitor, Walker touched the money, then smelled his fingertip. Three hundred and eleven, a substantial sum.

He smiled, put the money in the donation jar, and settled in to wait for the next customer. ○

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THE WAVE-FUNCTION COLLAPSE

Steven Utley

Steven Utley's story collection, *The Beasts of Love* (Wheatland Press), was released last October, and another collection, *Where or When,* comprising mostly stories originally published in *Asimov's,* will be issued in the UK by PS Publishing sometime this year. Mr. Utley tells us that "'The Wave-Function Collapse,' of course, is part of the perennially soon-to-be-finished *Silurian Tales*."

All he can do at first is stare dully through the window at the barren Paleozoic landscape. Then focus sharpens, his mind begins to work again, disbelief increases in inverse proportion to subsiding shock, and soon his thoughts seem to outrace the helicopter's shadow below. He constructs his first hypothesis: Somebody's made a terrible mistake. By the time the machine swoops in low over the bay and circles to land on the ship's flight deck, the hypothesis has mutated into a suspicion: Somebody's playing a terrible practical joke. As he steps down from the cabin, he is almost angry enough to punch somebody, anybody—even the civilian liaison, who emerges from a group of Navy men, but whose solemn expression disarms him.

The liaison shakes his hand and guides him down into the ship, talking all the while. "We'll expedite your return, of course, you'll be home before noon, someone is going to be there to pick you up and, ah, take you wherever you need to go, damn, I'm *so* sorry."

Expedite, he thinks. Return. Home.

He gropes for the meanings of the words, cannot quite get hold of them, gives up the effort, consoles himself with the savage thought, Yeah, well, if this *is* a monstrous prank, somebody's sure as hell gonna catch seven kinds

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of hell for it. One doesn't with impunity throw the jump station off its holy schedule for the sake of a laugh. One doesn't get away with saying something about a man's wife that's neither true nor funny. He is amused by the latter qualification. A laugh or a sob escapes. *Especially* if it's not funny.

Despite the general sense of urgency, he does not go immediately to the head of the line at the jump station and, so, through and straight home to the twenty-first century of the Common Era. He does not even go to the jump station to wait, but to sick bay. It takes time to make the station's tight schedule flex enough to accommodate him, and he has certain preparations to make in the meantime. One does not simply fling oneself through a hole in spacetime or whatever it is. He really wants, would give anything (he tells himself), for a good stiff drink or even a bad limp one, but what he gets instead is a quick physical examination and an emetic. "It's never a good idea to make the jump on a full stomach," the Navy doctor reminds him. "Dramamine is ineffective in the prevention or treatment of time-travel sickness."

While the liaison and the Navy doctor confer in a corner, he cools his heels and the minutes drag on and doubt eats away at his disbelief and the likelihood that this is a joke recedes. A lump of sorrow is forming in the center of his chest. It cannot be, he thinks, no it cannot be cannot cannot.

From a pocket of his patched work shirt (still permeated with the grime of inland proto-North America) he removes an old-fashioned paper envelope on which his name has been inscribed with a calligraphy pen, and from the envelope he takes several folded sheets of old-fashioned stationery, smoothes them across his thigh, and reads, "There's something very nineteenth-century—at least, something very romantic-novel-heroine-ish (whether fainting from the vapors category or ripped bodice/heaving bosom kind)—about writing letters and sending them floating off into the unknown after you. I suspect I'm going to spend a *fortune* on postage while you're gone. I've already sent one letter your way this week, but I won't say I hope it's caught up with you 'by now.' Even traveling by slow boat to wherever you 'are,' it must have reached you before the end of the Paleozoic age. Now I've made my head hurt. Einstein notwithstanding, these revved-up ape brains of ours cling tenaciously to Newtonian notions of absolute time. We live in the now, trailing, to be sure, a few seconds of the past as we press ahead into the future, but it's always *now* wherever (whenever) we go. What's happening in the Andromeda galaxy this instant? Yes, of course, we can know only what happened there a million years ago, yet I exist in this instant, and the universe, too, and that includes Andromeda. And existence requires that something be happening. (I detest metaphysics. The universe exists even when we aren't looking at it or thinking about it.) And what about four hundred million years? You are supposed to have a synchronous anchor embedded in your proper matrix, which is here (with *moi*) (sigh)—so say the physicists, anyhow. But doesn't that fly in the face of relativity? Isn't it too too Newtonian? Too too tootsie. Old song, I think. I've been too long without sleep. And, already, too long without you."

He holds the pages close to his face and inhales a subtle scent of her, and this helps him to decide on a course of action.

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* * *

At length he is transferred to a little room adjoining the jump station. When the senior jump-station technician pops in to say that there will be an open slot in the schedule in about forty-five minutes, he clutches at her sleeve and demands that she refresh his memory on a couple of points.

"Explain," he says, "this business about the synchronous link."

He tightens his grip as she tries to pull away. She shoots a look at the doctor, who shoots one back. Its meaning is clear: Please just humor him, he's suffered a terrible blow.

"The link," she says, "it's sort of like a brake or an anchor."

"Brake, anchor, what does it *do*?"

"It's, well, unless you can follow the math—"

"The hell with the math, tell me what it *does*."

She jerks her sleeve free and glares first at him, then at the doctor, then back at him. Somehow jump-station techs have got the strange notion into their heads that they are an elite and therefore not quite answerable to just anyone. She would be perfectly within what she regards as her rights were she to tell him to take a flying leap at the moon. Nevertheless, possibly because the Navy doctor is present and Navy officers count for more than, say, someone who has obviously been off in the primeval hinterlands studying weird bugs and pond scum, she says, snappishly, "The link does what a link does. It connects. It synchronizes this space-time matrix with the one on the, uh, other side."

"So an hour passes here as it passes there."

"Right."

"An hour or a day or a year."

"Right" (testily).

"So if you leave there on a Friday night and spend a weekend here and then go back, it's Monday when you get there."

"Basically that's it, yes."

"You can't twiddle with some knobs, shave off a day or two? So I'd leave here on Monday but get there on Saturday afternoon, say?"

Incredulity and contempt commingle in her expression. "This isn't some damn sci-fi show."

"But—"

"Nobody is messing with the link, period."

Damn, he thinks, scratch one plan of attack. "Then what about the many-worlds thing? Tell me about that."

The senior jump-station tech grimaces, looks imploringly at the doctor. "I got a schedule to keep, y'know."

"Please," says the doctor. "It won't take but a moment."

"The idea is," says the tech, grinding the words between her back teeth, "every possible universe is created at the instant it becomes possible. Like if it's possible for you to jump to either side, to the left or the right, you jump to the left in one universe and to the right in another. And you don't jump at all in still another universe."

"How do you know which universe you're in?"

"You split and get duplicated along with everything else when the uni-

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verse splits and duplicates itself. You're always in the universe you're supposed to be in."

"No." He shakes his head. "I'm not. Not yet. Listen. I have a plan."

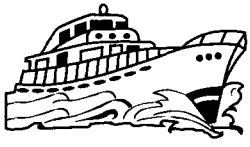
The tech glances anxiously at her watch. "And *I* have a schedule, and I'm *off* it. Sorry."

She withdraws toward her ozone-reeking sanctum and has just got through the door when he moves to follow. Just before the door swings shut behind her, he sees her see him coming and hears her yelp for help and feels her not inconsiderable weight thrown against the door. The doctor tries to pull him away, but he is a big man hardened by field work and efficiently stiff-arms the man while pushing the woman on the opposite side of the door steadily backward. Suddenly, she stops resisting. He tumbles through the door, and a couple of junior techs grab him.

They do not grip him quite firmly enough. He sends one of them spinning against their boss and as those two go down together in a noisy heap he simply brushes away the other, who lacks not only the grip but the reach as well. Reinforcements are on the way, however. He bolts. He disappears further into the depths of the ship. By the time the public-address system barks out a "Now hear this!" he has found himself a cubby-hole and a heavy wrench with which to discourage anything as unsubtle as a frontal assault. Thus entrenched, he ponders the puzzle he knows he must solve if he is to save his wife's life.

The Navy officers and enlisted personnel are not fools, they know their ship, and in short order they have located the man. Getting him out of his hiding place without hurting him or being hurt by him is another matter. Duly summoned, the liaison arrives with the doctor in tow and without preamble says, "We know you're upset, you have our deepest sympathy, but we're here to help you, so just come out of there right now, okay?"

Dangling his wrench negligently, the man answers, "First tell me about the cat in the box."



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Nonplussed, the liaison looks at the doctor and the Navy officer and is met with blank stares.

"I know you're distraught," says the liaison, "but," and is cut short with, "What I am is *desperate*. I've been thinking in here, and I believe I may have the solution to my problem. But I've got to be sure I'm remembering stuff correctly. I need to know about the cat in the box."

Nearby, though out of the man's line of sight, the doctor abruptly turns and vanishes down a corridor.

"I don't think I understand," says the liaison. "What cat in what box? Look, can't we discuss this back at the jump station? That slot in the schedule won't be there much longer, you know. The chief tech says she can't promise there'll be another one before next shift."

"The slot can wait until I'm sure of my plan."

"What plan? Look, why don't you just come out of there? We're *here* for you."

"I appreciate that. I appreciate everybody's concern. Thank you, everybody, for your sympathy and condolences. But I'm hoping to obviate the need for sympathy and condolences, and what I really need is your understanding and your cooperation."

"You have them, you know that!"

"Don't patronize me. Hear me out. Whatzisname, the physicist, says we're not actually in Paleozoic time, but some alternate dimension, universe, whatever. I never thought much about it before today. Now it's what *I have to believe*."

The doctor returns, practically dragging along the senior tech by her hand. The liaison heaves a sigh of relief and says, "Here's someone who should be able to tell you what you want to know," and he separates her from the doctor and draws her into the man's line of sight.

Clearly unhappy with this treatment, the chief tech swats the liaison's hands away. "Okay," she says, "I'm here."

"Please refresh my memory," says the man. "I've been trying to remember the experiment with Whatzisname's cat. The one inside the box."

"Schrödinger's cat."

"That's the one. Schrödinger locked a cat in a box with a radioactive substance and a Geiger counter."

"Actually, it was a *thought* experiment. He didn't really—"

"Whatever. The point is, the cat's in the box, and—and what?"

"There's one chance in two that within a certain length of time the radioactive substance will emit an electron that'll make the Geiger counter click. If the Geiger counter clicks, it activates some device that kills the cat."

"Yeah. And there's no way to tell if the cat's alive or dead unless and until you look inside the box."

"Yeah."

"Until you do look inside, the cat is neither alive nor dead."

"Um, well, it actually has to be one or the other, of course."

"Dead *or* alive."

"Yeah."

"There's no way it can be neither of those things or a little of each?"

"Uh, well," the chief tech says uneasily, "of course it can't."

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"But *in principle* the cat is neither alive nor dead so far as it matters in the world outside the box."

"Uh, yeah, sort of. In principle."

"And there's something called the, uh, wave—wave fraction?"

"Wave-function."

"The wave-function, yes. So tell me about this wave-function."

"The whole experiment, the box and the cat and the rest, they're a system, and the so-called wave-function gives probabilities, nothing more, on how the system will work. It's equally probable that the cat is dead or alive. When you open the box and observe which state the cat is actually in, dead or alive, the wave-function is said to collapse."

"The wave-function ceases to be a wave-function *only* as soon as you try to observe it?"

"Yeah."

The man grins triumphantly. "Thank you," he tells the tech, "thank you, thank you, thank you," and to the liaison he says, "My course is clear."

"It is?"

"You can't send me through just yet. Not for a while, in fact. Maybe not for a long while."

"Why not?"

"It's her only chance."

"*Whose?*" During this brief exchange, the liaison's color has undergone dramatic variations.

"My wife's. The only way to keep her alive until I figure out my next move. Listen. Until I actually go through, what you say has happened hasn't happened. There's a chance it hasn't, anyway. She's like the cat in the box. Not alive, maybe, but not dead, either."

"You're pinning too much on an abstraction," says the liaison, turning to the chief tech halfway through uttering the sentence, "on a mathematical fiction, right?"

She nods. "The wave-function's just an expression. You can say a particle has both position and velocity, but if you try to fix the exact position, the particle doesn't have any velocity, and if you try to measure the velocity, the particle is in motion and isn't anywhere in particular. The wave-function's an expression of the probabilities of a particle assuming each possible state at the instant you measure it. Until that instant, all possible states exist in a potential sense."

"I understand enough. The wave-function goes from an indefinite state to a definite one only when you measure it. And whenever a collapse occurs, reality splits into as many parallel realities as are needed to accommodate each possible outcome of measurement. I mean to find the right reality. The one where my wife hasn't died. I mean to interfere with this wave-function and put off the collapse."

The liaison steps toward him, then away as he gestures with the wrench. "I realize that this must be very painful for you, but you have to face up to reality, you know."

"I reject the reality I'm being offered. I want—I *mean* to find a different reality. Get these techs to twiddle some knobs, cross some wires, so I get sent to a slightly different universe."

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"'Twiddle some knobs, cross some wires!'" The chief tech looks as though she has heard blasphemous or perhaps only imbecile utterances. "What you're asking is impossible."

"No. This terrible thing that's happened, that everybody *tells* me has happened, that's what's impossible. I'm talking about a possibility. A possible universe."

"Okay, let me put it this way. Even if it was possible for us to do what you want us to do—and it *isn't*—the result you're hoping for's so *improbable*—"

"But not impossible."

"But so *very* improbable. Look, suppose we did twiddle some knobs and cross some wires for you—not that we're going to, but just suppose we did, and you got, ah, there—and nothing was different?"

"Then I'd talk your twin into shooting me through again, and if necessary, *her* twin, and then *hers*. Until I got where I wanted to go. Maybe if you gave me a note I could show to your twin—"

The liaison interrupts to ask, "Will you excuse me for a moment while I discuss something with the Navy?"

"Go ahead."

The liaison motions the Navy officer into a corridor, out of sight and out of earshot, and asks, "Can't you get him out of there?"

"He's a big strong guy, and he's found himself a big heavy wrench, and at the moment he's not in his right mind. I understand he's torn up about his wife. But I don't want any of my people getting hurt. They have wives and husbands, too."

"Isn't there another way into that compartment?"

"Yes, but he's got the door dogged good and tight."

"Well, how about pumping in sleep gas or something?"

The officer does not have to answer this question, so eloquent is his expression just at the moment.

"Well," says the liaison, "we can't just let him stay in there."

"Why not? Let him stay in there for a while. He can't hurt anything, just bang on the bulkhead a bit. He'll come out peacefully once he calms down."

The liaison glances at his wristwatch. "If we don't get him to the jump station in the next eleven minutes, it'll be tomorrow or next Tuesday before we can get him home. The family needs him there to help with, you know, arrangements."

"Then promise him whatever he wants, and he'll come out right now," and the officer motions to the doctor and the chief tech to join them.

"But," the liaison sputters, and gets no farther, because there is a glint of steel in the officer's eye.

"*Promise* him whatever he wants."

"Ah," says the liaison.

"Of course," says the doctor.

"Whatever," says the chief tech.

On receipt of the promise, the man drops the wrench with a clang and emerges from his cubby-hole, at which point several carefully selected bluejackets, each much stronger of grip and longer of reach than a jump-station tech, move in and restrain him until the doctor has stuck a hypo-

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dermic needle into him with the comment, "Just a mild sedative." The next thing he knows is the sinus-burning tang of ozone. The next thing he knows after that is where he is. The jump-station techs are at their places, he is strapped to a gurney. The liaison and the doctor move into his field of vision, and he strains against the straps and manages to croak, "You're killing her! You're taking away the only chance she has."

"Ah, my friend," and the liaison's voice, like his face, is full of solicitude, "I'm sorry, but she's already dead."

"Provisionally," he gasps, "she's only dead *provisionally!*"

The mild sedative, however, is having the effect of a strong one, and sleep comes before it can be recognized for what it is. Bulkheads become permeable membranes through which Dreamland oozes and ebbs like an impatient sea wooed by a jealous moon. Then he feels himself hurtling away from the world, toward some other.

"Poor bastard," says the liaison.

"Yeah," says the Navy doctor. "It'd be nice if he actually could slip into the universe he wants."

The chief jump-station tech shakes her head. "Nobody gets to pick the universe they're in. If they could, nobody'd hang around in the universes where there's death and sickness—"

"His *wife,*" the liaison tells her severely, "died in a car crash. He just heard the news this morning."

She looks scornfully at the two men. "Well, it's a shame, but it only goes to show. I still say he must've seen too many sci-fi shows. Those goddamn things give people such unrealistic expectations."

"Nevertheless," the doctor begins, "I hope he," but the chief tech suddenly pushes past him and the liaison to glare and bawl at her people, "Let's *scramble,* boys and girls, we're on a goddamn *schedule* here!" and her people do scramble.

"Nevertheless," the liaison tells the doctor as they turn to go, "I hope so, too." ○

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THE DODO FACTORY

Lori Selke

Lori Selke lives in Oakland, CA, where she publishes a small literary 'zine called *Problem Child.* She's a freelance writer and the contributing music editor to *Girlfriends Magazine.* Ms. Selke was a finalist for the 2001 Lambda Literary Award and served as a judge for the 2003 Tiptree Award. Of her first story for *Asimov's* she says, "I've never been to Mauritius. I blame growing up next to an agricultural college for my fixation on micro-breeds of livestock."

The turkeys were in the apples again. After gorging for an afternoon on their fruits, the non-improved domesticateds that Dr. Kenneth Yeoh raised would often refuse to head back to their pen for the evening, stubbornly insisting on roosting in the apple-laden branches all night. Kenneth would have let them stay, except that the countryside was infested with coyotes, and the turkey breed was too rare to risk. That's why he was out walking the acequia ditch along the perimeter of his New Mexico ranch, more than a mile from his house, when the courier came.

"Come on, clucks, don't you know that you're rare and precious and can't be allowed to wander off like this? Come on back to the coop." Kenneth wasn't so absorbed in cajoling the recalcitrant flock that he didn't hear the courier coming up behind him. The man's boots, breaking through the underbrush, were a dead giveaway. The turkeys heard him, too, but they refused to be perturbed.

"Dr. Yeoh." The courier cleared his throat. "I need your signature."

"I'm sorry you had to walk all the way out here," Kenneth said, turning to face the man. "Must've been some walk."

The courier shrugged and held out his tablet; Dr. Yeoh accepted the package and signed.

It was lighter than he had expected. Perhaps he was wrong, and the in-

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terview hadn't gone as well as he'd thought; perhaps he'd been t… down.

But no. When he tore open the cardboard envelope, there was a slim packet of documents, fastened with an electronic seal in the shape of Cryptocyte's logo, with the keyhole and double helix. *Breaking This Seal Signifies Acceptance of Contract and Its Terms,* it read. Beneath that was the acceptance letter.

"Well, clucks, it looks like we're going to have to be separated for a while. Some of us, anyway. But don't worry, I promise to take good care of the children."

"Why do you call them clucks? They don't make anything like that sound, do they?" Surita Das asked.

Kenneth shrugged. "Dad raised chickens in the yard; he called them clucks, and I guess the term stuck." He smiled. "I save the scientific accuracy for my lab reports."

They were waiting in the terminal of Charles de Gaulle International Airport in Paris for their flight to Mauritius. Surita was dressed in a business suit that was stylish yet entirely conservative. Only the cherry-red streaks in her hair belied her polished professional exterior. Kenneth felt decidedly disheveled in his jeans and work shirt. Surita, he had learned, worked in the public relations department of Bristol Deep Sea Engineering, the British artificial-island company that was co-sponsoring the project.

"So what's the difference between non-improved turkeys and the regular kind?" she asked. "And why are they better for this project than other birds?"

"Turkey eggs are about the same size as dodo eggs," Kenneth explained. "Domesticated turkeys are easier to handle than wild. And non-improved birds are healthier. They don't suffer from hip dysplasia or other problems associated with overbreeding."

"I know that normal turkeys can't breed on their own," Surita said.

Kenneth nodded. "They have to be artificially inseminated, because the boys' breasts are so big. It's ridiculous, really. But non-improveds come from a more robust stock. They're half-feral in some of the villages in Mexico that I studied. They just wander around the village, eating bugs and seeds and whatever else they can scavenge."

"And have you eaten one?" Surita asked, raising an eyebrow.

Kenneth kissed his fingers. "Delicious." They both laughed.

"So tell me more about your role in this endeavor," Kenneth said.

"Only if you promise to answer all of my dopey science questions in return," Surita replied.

"Deal."

"Well, I'm on assignment to sell this project to the public. Simple enough." She smoothed her hair with her hand as she spoke. Kenneth nodded, encouraging her to go on. "Artificial island technology began with oil-drilling platforms, and that's not a heritage that endears us to the masses, you know. So it's my job to promote an alternative view."

"Like how we're providing wildlife sanctuaries for endangered species."

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"Endangered and extinct." She nodded smartly. "Which brings us back to the dodo, and my stupid scientific questions."

Kenneth smiled. "That was quick."

"Well, what else would you like to know? I'm like an in-house reporter. I go to the laboratory complex on Mauritius and hang out with the tech guys. . . ."

"Like me," Kenneth said.

"Exactly. I try not to make too much of a nuisance of myself while I poke around. I talk to the media, brief them on the particulars, take them on tours, send them materials. And, when it's ready, I'll visit the island itself, have some stills and footage taken, and begin coordinating a campaign to show what a wonderful job Bristol DSE's done, how sexy the technology is, etcetera. I develop a pitch for the multimillionaires who want to finance their own private ocean getaways, and for the average member of the public who just wants to dream about it. I address the concerns of the environmentalists—the endangered angle is a great one for that, we've already had inquiries from the government of New Zealand about building a kakapoo sanctuary, in fact. In general, I'm to make us seem like big, rich, cutting-edge altruists. But first, we have to make this project work."

"Do you like your job?" Kenneth asked.

She smiled, flashing white teeth. "I love it. It's terribly exciting, don't you think?"

Kenneth smiled, too. "Yes, I guess it is."

"You don't sound so enthusiastic," she chided, still smiling.

"Well, this project is a lot harder than it sounds," Kenneth said. "Did you know we're not even sure what dodos looked like, exactly?"

"I thought we had illustrations," Surita said.

"We do. But they're not eyewitness sketches, for the most part. And the only specimen we have is just a head and a foot, preserved at the Oxford Museum. That's where we got the DNA samples. Which means we have exactly one complete DNA profile for this animal."

"So much for genetic diversity."

"Exactly. We're lucky the bird was a female; otherwise we'd never have been able to get any breeding pairs at all."

"Hold on," Surita interrupted. "This is one of the things I'm confused about. If the bird was female, doesn't that mean that all you can do is clone it? Won't all its . . . daughters, I guess, be female as well?"

Kenneth shook his head. "I know why you're confused," he said. "Birds and mammals are different—they have different sets of sex chromosomes. In mammals, it's X and Y, and females have two X's while males have one of each. In birds, the opposite is true. Their chromosomes are labeled Z and W. Females have both; males only have the Z chromosome."

"Really!"

"So we can construct a female gene set and a male gene set from what we recovered from the Oxford specimen," Kenneth concluded. "But that's just the beginning of our challenges."

"Go on."

"One set of DNA isn't going to be enough, but it's all we've got to work with. Now, keep in mind, I'm not a geneticist, I'm just an ornithologist.

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But the plan is to 'borrow' DNA from other species of birds to supplement the genetic larder, as it were."

"Fascinating." Surita seemed genuinely interested, not just humoring him. Kenneth's face suddenly felt warm.

"Please stop me if I start to blither," he said.

"Oh, I will, I promise," she said, and patted him reassuringly on the knee.

"Okay." Kenneth took a deep breath. "We might even be borrowing genetic material from other organisms, too, not just closely related species. In part because there aren't that many related species in the first place; dodos were pretty unique in that respect."

"I thought they were just a sort of pudgy pigeon," Surita said.

"Distant relations," Kenneth corrected. "But we've been developing a library of genetic material from other flightless pigeons, such as the Victoria Crown pigeon from New Guinea, as well as African fruit pigeons and Asian nicobar pigeons and anything else that might be useful. We've also been looking at birds that still live on Mauritius and nearby islands."

"We?" Surita cocked her head.

Kenneth laughed. "Okay, okay. I guess I'm getting carried away. I'm only the turkey man."

"Yes, you haven't quite explained what the turkeys are about," Surita said.

"Oh, that's complicated. The short version is, we're going to use turkeys to foster dodo chicks."

"I see."

"That's another one of our challenges. We know almost nothing about the dodo's habits and behavior. We know that it was a ground-nester—that's one factor that led to its extinction. We know some of what it ate. But that's it. Sometimes, bird behavior is largely genetic—the white-crowned sparrow sings its distinctive song even when raised in isolation, for example, and chickens seem to be born with a pecking instinct, certain ducks with a diving one. Other times, behavior is learned, as in how parrots learn to mimic human speech. Blackbirds learn to recognize certain predators. They're not born with the knowledge that owls and cats are dangerous, and they can even be convinced to defend themselves against a detergent bottle under the right circumstances. In the dodo's case, there's no way to tell what sorts of behaviors might or might not be innate until we've got a live specimen on our hands."

"So you might end up with a dodo that thinks it's a turkey," Surita said.

"Precisely."

"Sounds like you've got your work cut out for you, then."

"I'm sure I'll manage to keep busy."

"Not too busy, I hope." Surita tugged at the hem of her skirt. "So you're having your turkey breeding stock shipped to the island? They're not flying with you, are they?"

"No, they're taking the slow boat. Billionaires may be rich and eccentric, but they're also surprisingly frugal. I'm told that the turkeys will be there to meet me; I took a few days to see Paris before my final flight."

"Clever man," she said.

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Kenneth's next words were interrupted by the boarding announcement. Surita glanced at her ticket and smiled. "That's my row," she said. "It was lovely talking to you, and I'm sure we'll have more opportunities once we reach Mauritius. Have a good flight, see you when we land!" And with that, the boarding tunnel swallowed her up. Kenneth waited for his seat to be called, straining to interpret the French numbers being announced over the intercom. Soon enough, it was his turn as well. His journey had begun.

It wasn't quite the tropical paradise he had expected, but then again he couldn't say quite what it was that he had been expecting. Certainly not women in sarongs and white sand beaches. But more palm trees, perhaps. The climate was milder, and Kenneth had forgotten that they were crossing the equator; it was no longer late summer, but nearly spring.

He felt a little silly, carrying his prophylactic course of anti-malarial drugs in his briefcase along with his laptop. The air was heavy with moisture, such a contrast to the New Mexican mountains. It reminded him just a little of his graduate student days, working on his dissertation research in rural Mexico. The turkeys would be happy here, at least. If they ever saw the outside of their lab pens, that is.

Surita found him again once they deboarded, and chatted happily as a bus took them from the airport across the island to the capital, toward a complex of low bungalow-style housing at the outskirts of town, surrounded by greenery.

"This is where we'll be staying," Surita nodded at the scene outside their window. "Have you talked with your roommate yet?"

Kenneth shook his head and began leafing through his sheaf of papers. "I can't even remember his name; some Danish naval engineer, I think," he said.

"I'm staying with a geneticist," Surita remarked. "If we manage to have anything in common, it should be a very enlightening stay."

Kenneth's bungalow was clean, modern, and spare. His roommate, Anders, wasn't present, but the stacks of boxes and suitcases in one bedroom indicated that he was, at least, in residence. On the kitchen counter was a huge bouquet of waxy red flowers with yellow spadix—anthuriums, if Kenneth recalled correctly—and a large wooden model ship. The kitchen was stocked with lunchmeats, some cheese spread of some sort, boxes of juice and milk, and several bottles of Pepsi-Cola. The cupboards were stocked with spaghetti, tinned fish, peanut butter, chutney, tea, coffee, bread, and chocolate.

On the counter was a map of the complex, showing the locations of the swimming pool and health club, a small convenience store, bicycles to borrow, and the parking lot, where he would be picked up each morning and taken to work.

The bus that picked him up at the complex parking lot looked to be the same one he had ridden in on from the airport. Kenneth could see the blank patches on the bus interior where decals had been steamed off; he guessed that the vehicle was a recently decommissioned privately run tour bus, now corporatized and slicked up for his benefit. He clutched tightly to his laptop. The ride was unexpectedly smooth, and the bus

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nearly empty, another surprise. They drove to an office building near the Port Louis shipyard, where a suited functionary was waiting for him. "Welcome to the Dodo Factory," he said to Kenneth.

Kenneth's office was one floor above the lab complex, where his turkeys would be living. On his desk was another bouquet of anthuriums, and a computer workstation, which was currently half-disassembled. Beneath the desk, a striking blonde-haired woman in black jeans and a black shirt poked at some cables. She glanced down her chin at him for only a moment.

"I'm Tomila," she said. "Your computer's not quite set up yet."

"Hi, I'm Kenneth," he said. He started to extend his hand and then thought better of it; Tomila was already turning her attention back to her task. "Should I just get out of your way?" he said.

"Stay. Unpack. This won't take long. So you are one of the dodo scientists?" she asked.

"I suppose so, yes."

"They're not really dodos," Tomila said. "They're more like Dodo-Like-Objects. DLOs."

"What makes you say that?" Kenneth asked.

Tomila grunted. She extracted herself from the tangle of wiring on the floor and brushed off her hands as she stood. "The supplemental DNA. Where are you getting it from?"

"Near relatives, mostly. Various species of flightless pigeons. But we've also been scavenging whatever we might find useful from all over. DNA is DNA; all it does is encode proteins, really. So if it's a useful protein, we'll consider using the gene for it."

Tomila dumped herself unceremoniously in Kenneth's office chair and began typing on his keyboard. "See? DLOs. They're not really dodos at all, they're a mish-mash of anything you feel like using, genetically speaking." Her Russian accent was slight, but it made her enunciate every syllable, giving her speech a slight formal air. Which was quite a contrast with the rest of her presentation, casual to the point of insouciance.

"Technically, they're merely transgenic. Like corn."

"Corn with fish genes, you mean?" Tomila tossed her blonde hair with one hand, still staring at the screen rather than at him. "Fish corn. Ridiculous to call it corn. It's mish-mash."

"If you feel so strongly about it," Kenneth said, keeping his voice light, "why are you working on this project?"

Tomila finally stopped typing and stared at him, scowling. "I'm here for the computers," she said. "I don't care what you scientists"—and in her mouth, the word sounded vaguely disdainful, as if she were condescending merely to speak of them—"think you're doing with genes and proteins and artificial islands with artificial environments. Your computers need to talk to each other, need to be kept running, and that's what I do." She stood up from his chair. "And yours, Mr. Bigshot Scientist, is ready."

Tomila brushed past someone just coming in the door as she whisked out. The man now standing in Kenneth's doorway was black, and dressed quite nattily in a tie and short-sleeved shirt. He wore a short beard and a gold earring, and had lively eyes. He was smiling.

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"I see you have met TNT," the man commented.

"Who?"

"Tomila. Our pet sysadmin. Tomila Nazarevna Tebeneka. T-N-T. And she's not called that because she's dynamite in bed. Not that any of us would know. She's a bit of a hot pepper, you probably noticed." The man extended his broad hand in greeting. "I'm Petric. Petric Ndamase, but I don't expect you to be able to pronounce that. Or spell either one—that's Petric as in P-E-T-R-I-C; my parents weren't the best spellers."

Kenneth smiled. "I'm Kenneth Yeoh."

"Mister Bird Man!" They shook hands heartily. "Kenneth, eh? So formal. Did you get many jokes about your name in school, then?" Petric asked.

Now Kenneth was grinning. "You mean, Ken Yeoh, as in 'can you?' I used to tell anyone who tried that on me that my real first name was Quing Lai. 'You can use that instead, if you like.' That usually stopped them."

Petric laughed, flashing his white teeth. "And was it the truth?"

Kenneth smirked. "No. Kenneth is my real first name. Quing Lai was my uncle. I'm third generation."

"So you don't speak Chinese? Pity, I was hoping you could help me out with some of the local menus."

"No Chinese. Only Spanish."

Petric's eyes widened. "Really? How did that come to pass?"

"Bilingual education reform; I grew up in California. Did my dissertation work in some rural villages in Mexico, so that helped too. I know, I'm a freak."

"You're not the only one on board here," Petric replied with a wink. He stepped all the way into the room. "We are all misfits, as far as I can tell."

"And what's your role on the project here?" Kenneth asked.

"I am the chief ecologist. I did *my* dissertation work on the nature preserves around Reunión Island, so it should be obvious why I was hired. I came to ask after your turkeys, if they had any special requirements I should be aware of."

"I didn't think they would be living on the platform proper," Kenneth said.

Petric shrugged. "Plans change. Better safe than sorry."

"It was hard enough to get clearance for them to get here at all."

Petric chuckled. "I imagine some strings had to be pulled in high places. So tell me, what do your turkeys eat?"

Kenneth chuckled. "Just about anything they want to. They're very adaptable. They like weeds, clover, acorns, apples, berries, grass seeds, grain meal, snails. . . ."

"Snails!"

Kenneth nodded. "They love snails. Worms, too, and even ants sometimes. At the ranch, I let them forage for themselves, and just supplemented their feed with some dried corn once a day. Frankly, I'd be worried that they might strip some rare plant of its foliage or something if they were let loose."

"Not a problem on Mauritius, at least," Petric said. "Most of the biologi-

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cally sensitive areas are closed off and protected. Not that there's a lot of that left," he added philosophically. "So when do the prize gobblers arrive?"

"They were supposed to meet me here. But when I spoke to my boss, she told me they were still on the boat, and it'll be a few days yet."

"Who is your boss?"

"Janice Torralba."

"Ah!" Pertic spread his arms. "The fix-it woman. You're lucky. I think she's the best manager on the staff. She knows how to stay out of the way, but don't let that fool you into thinking she isn't working hard on your behalf." Petric clapped him on the shoulder. "Here, why don't I show you around, introduce you to some of your new coworkers. And show you the all-important cafeteria."

"And where the restrooms are," Kenneth added.

Petric chuckled. "Of course. All the essentials."

It actually took nearly a week longer for the turkeys to arrive, enough time for Kenneth to move from doodling in his lab notebook and walking the shipyard grounds, to fretting about their continued well-being. Finally, one afternoon as he was watching one portion of the huge island platform take shape near the shore, he got word that his turkeys would be arriving in just a few hours.

Despite their longer-than-planned sea journey, they seemed none the worse for wear, feathers fluffed, voices quiet. He stood among the unloaded cages, talking to his charges. "I hope you like your new home, girls," he said. "I promise to take good care of you here. Think of it as an extended vacation. You're world traveler turkeys now. You'll be the envy of all your friends. Maybe even of your entire species."

Then he heard a familiar voice nearby—Tomila's. "About time," she said to no one in particular.

"What are you here for?" Kenneth asked.

Tomila looked over from where she was standing, near a series of stacked crates. "Waiting for computer equipment. For the render farm. Modeling DNA sequences. The geneticists are anxious."

"You know," Kenneth said, "I have yet to meet an actual geneticist on this project. You'd think they'd be everywhere."

"They like to keep to themselves. They're very clubby. Also very hard-working. Right now, they are comparing the dodo gene sequence to samples on loan from the Mauritian museum, to see if the dodo is really a pigeon or not. Also to see if any of the other extinct island birds are close relatives that they can borrow from." Tomila sat on top of one crate and started swinging her legs. "They're prima donnas. So I baby-sit their computers for them this afternoon. That's all I really am, a big babysitter."

"I know the feeling," Kenneth said.

Tomila barked a laugh. "You're not a babysitter, you're an egg sitter." She looked at the cages surrounding him. "Or an egg-sitter babysitter. Those are yours? They will be living at the lab?"

Kenneth nodded.

Tomila squinted and bent over to examine one of the hens. "They don't look entirely like turkeys to me."

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"Oh no," Kenneth said. "These are what domesticated turkeys all used to look like, before intensive breeding took over. Those huge-breasted dumb birds you're used to seeing," and he couldn't help cracking a smile, "are turkey-like objects."

Tomila snorted. "Touché."

"I don't suppose you might be free for lunch."

Kenneth appeared at Surita's open doorway and tried not to crowd her tiny office space.

Surita looked up with a bright smile before turning back to bash at her keyboard for a bit. "Kenneth! So lovely to see you again. Are you enjoying Mauritius? I would be happy to go to lunch with you, if you'll give me just a moment to finish up here."

Kenneth glanced over Surita's shoulder to peer at the computer screen. "What are you working on?"

"Nothing important. The usual PR bullshit."

On the screen, Kenneth saw a row of dodos, shaded in pastel colors: robin's egg blue, lavender, rose.

"Is that a logo or something?" he asked.

Surita smiled and clicked the window closed. "Not quite. It's a prototype model." She stood up from her desk. "Ready to go? I suppose it's the cafeteria for us, isn't it? No one's likely to have brought home cooking this far."

"Hold on," Kenneth said. "A model?"

Surita shrugged. "They're thinking of introducing pigmentation genes into the dodos, to tint the plumage."

"Why?"

"Well, some of the higher-ups had the idea that dodos might make good house pets. I guess they were trying to think past the artificial-island idea and look for broader applications, more profitable ones. Find an avenue for consumer support. As it is, our Mauritius II is a great showcase for both the artificial-island technology of Bristol DSE and the genetic manipulation and recovery techniques of Cryptocyte. But it's not very profitable; in essence, it's still a rich man's folly. I can't imagine that selling designer dodos as house pets—excuse me, companion animals—" she made a face at her own words, "is going to make up the deficit, but that's not my department, is it?"

Kenneth made a disgusted noise. "What's next, Easter eggs?"

Surita laughed. "Come on. Let's go to lunch." She paused after grabbing her purse. "You still want to go? You seem upset."

"Sure, let's go." He was silent for a long while as they walked down the hallways to the cafeteria.

"You are upset," Surita said.

"I guess. I don't know how I feel about this. Dodos to match your carpet? That's not what I signed up for."

"Kenneth." Surita stopped walking and faced him. "Dodos, the original species as the world knew them, are dead. It's taking loads of effort, human intervention, to bring them back into existence again. These animals cannot survive anymore without our intervention, our shepherding. We're

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already inserting foreign genetic material into the original DNA. What's the harm in something like this, then?"

"I didn't imagine this project to be about creating a designer house pet, that's all."

"Just a millionaire's folly, instead?" Kenneth dropped his shoulders at her words. Surita touched him lightly on the arm. "Kenneth. We can't return the dodo to nature—it would just go extinct again. It's going to be domesticated, one way or the other, as a zoo attraction, a genetic experiment . . . a house pet."

"I know I'm being irrational," Kenneth said.

"I just don't want you to take it out on me, or on the project." Surita smiled. "I'd miss you, for one thing." She started off down the hall again. "Come on, I hear they're serving octopus curry today."

It wasn't long after that that Petric broke the news.

"The higher-ups want a presentation," he said, wincing theatrically. "A dodo and pony show, as it were."

Kenneth chuckled. "And I'm to be part of this?"

"Worse," Petric said. "You're the star exhibit. You and the clucks."

The presentation was to be attended by top-level executives from Bristol Deep-Sea Engineering and Cryptocyte, in partnership with their billionaire beneficiary's holding company. Plus top government officials from Mauritius, anxious to know the details of this high-profile scientific project they had agreed to host. A detachment from the Mauritius Wildlife Fund Trust had managed to wrangle an invitation as well.

The whole thing was to take place at the poshest hotel in town, the Labourdonnais Waterfront business center. Swank City, Kenneth thought. At least it would be amusing to see all of the scientists and engineers tricked out for the occasion.

Entirely too early on the Saturday morning of the presentation, a fleet of buses waited in the residential complex parking lot. Kenneth caught a glance of Anders on his way out, looking grimly Nordic as ever.

At the hotel, Kenneth limited his breakfast to a cup of vanilla tea, white, and some pappadums. He found a seat in the back of the main conference room and tried to look attentive. The morning session consisted of three speeches, by the Director of Engineering, the Director of Research and Development, and Surita's boss, the Director of Marketing. Kenneth caught a glance of Tomila lurking in the background, crouching on her haunches and dressed all in black as usual, which made her look like a stage hand. In a way, he supposed she was; she was Chief Propsmaster today, in charge of making sure none of the computers that the executives used for their fancy slideshows crashed at an inopportune time.

He flipped through the thick folder he had been issued at the start of the day. It was stocked with pamphlets on the parent companies and presentation documents from the various research divisions. Nothing the directors were saying was news to him—this part of the day was for the government officials and the company executives. The fun stuff would come with the technical presentations in the afternoon.

But first came lunch.

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More importantly, the social mixer portion of the day came just prior to lunch being served. Kenneth was introduced to a phalanx of Mauritian government officials, most of whose names or offices he couldn't remember after more than a moment. These included the Honorable Mr. Anil Soodhun, the Minister of Education and Scientific Research, and one of the members of the Minister of Environment's staff, and several others as well.

"I heard you were having a chicken-and-egg sort of problem," the Science Minister, the Honorable Mr. Anil Soodhun, said. "How to foster the dodo embryos, and all that."

"Ah, that is why we hired this man," his erstwhile manager Janice Torralba said, clapping Kenneth on the shoulder. Janice was standing with her supervisor, whose name Kenneth had already misplaced. This morning he had seen more of Janice than he'd managed in several weeks. "Meet Dr. Kenneth Yeoh," Janice said. "He's an ornithologist. He's providing the eggs and brood birds."

Kenneth and the science minister shook hands. "What kind of birds are you using for this project?" Mr. Soodhun asked.

"Non-improved domestic turkeys," Kenneth replied. He kept talking quickly, knowing that the look of surprise would fade the faster he could explain himself. "From the initial calculations, it looked like turkey eggs would be the best match."

"What is an unimproved turkey?" Mr. Soodhun asked.

Kenneth took a breath. "They're less overbred. Semi-wild. They don't have the problems that regular domestic turkeys face."

"You mean they don't drown in a rainstorm?" Mr. Soodhun asked, chuckling.

Kenneth forced a smile. "More importantly, they don't need assistance breeding."

"Why is that important for this study?" Mr. Soodhun asked.

"It's not, really," Kenneth conceded. "But it's related to egg production. Regular domestic turkeys produce very few eggs. The turkeys I work with are more fecund."

"Oh?"

"They're good layers," Kenneth said. "Better than standard domestics. But they also have a strong nesting and incubation instinct, like all turkeys. That, plus the egg dimensions, make them ideal for this project."

"Dr. Yeoh happens to be about the only non-improved turkey expert in the world," Janice said. The Mauritian official looked suitably impressed. "If you stay for the afternoon," she continued, "you'll get to hear the details on Kenneth's work so far. I hear he has some very interesting things to say about predicted behavioral traits."

"Ah, I wish I could stay," said Mr. Soodhun, "but I must depart after lunch."

"That's too bad," Janice said, escorting the official to another portion of the room.

As Kenneth watched them go, Petric came up behind him and clapped him lightly on the back. "Very good," Petric said. "That was a little PR coup, right there. I owe you a beer."

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"What for?" asked Kenneth.

"For taking some of the heat off of me," Petric smiled. "If you're the golden boy, I don't have to be."

"Why's that important?"

"You'll see." He went to pick up a plate of food, and Kenneth followed.

After they had loaded their plates with rougaille and rice, Petric headed toward a standing clutch of VIPs. They were having a loud, casual-sounding discussion, and looked to be finished with their meal already.

"Why didn't you choose one of the smaller islands in the area?" One of the upper-management business types asked. Kenneth wasn't entirely sure who the man represented—not the oil-rigging platform people, obviously. "Seems like those islands would be more cost-effective than building an artificial island from scratch. Somewhere like Ile Ronde, or a little farther afield, one of the Seychelles? Someone always seems to be putting one of the Seychelles up for sale."

General chuckles all around.

Janice said, "We considered it, but . . ."

Petric stepped up smoothly. "I argued against it." He shifted his plate to one hand, gesturing lightly with the other as he spoke. "I didn't want to impact an already-intact ecology. No matter how careful we are, the dodos are likely to have very specific needs that we must cater to. Better to do that in a truly pristine environment, I said. Where we can supply everything we need, and we don't need to eliminate any late, post-dodo invaders. We'll have more control, less rogue factors, and we won't be doing any damage to an extant island ecosystem."

Everyone nodded sagely.

"But you're right; it would have been cheaper to buy into the Seychelles. Only thirty million dollars! I would have really liked to claim Tromelin, but that would have required a diplomatic coup as well."

"Tromelin is claimed by both Mauritius and France," Janice said into Kenneth's ear. "We really tried for a while for permission to set up an offshore research station there, but it seems that even international billionaires don't have that kind of clout."

"Now if you gentlemen and ladies would excuse me," Petric said, indicating his laden plate. "It's going to be a long afternoon. I need my fortification." Everyone chuckled, and Petric and Kenneth took the opportunity to slip away to a corner table.

Kenneth noticed Surita nestled amongst the marketing group, surrounded by papers and bottles of Pepsi Cola; he couldn't see where Tomila might be.

After lunch, the engineers were first to present their work, complete with a scale model of the oil drilling platform cum artificial island. This was Anders's group. Anders himself was just one of a group of engineers sitting together near the front of the table; even after the presentation, Kenneth had no clue which part of the project was in his purview. Kenneth tried to follow the long explanations of how the island was to withstand the forces of the sea, the chances of volcanic activity, and so on. It was really quite interesting, if highly technical.

Next came the famous geneticists. Kenneth glanced at Tomila, back in

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her crouch, as the core research division began their presentation; she seemed to be ignoring them entirely. Their presentation naturally took up the bulk of the afternoon, in several segments. Kenneth found this discussion easier to follow, and even more fascinating. He'd already known the basics, but the details—the state of the Oxford specimen, missing genes, the supplemental genes they were using and the sources, protein matching, all of it—were new to him. The question-and-answer session after the presentation was long and detailed, too; this was the core of the project, after all.

"The DNA appeared to be very damaged, very fragmented," said the presenter. "It took a lot of work, decades of work, to put it into any sort of workable order. But we managed. We were lucky that the Oxford specimen had some soft tissue preserved. We supplemented that with DNA extracted from specimens in Copenhagen, the United States, and here in Mauritius—anywhere that had a dodo sample, basically, and anywhere that we could get permissions from. We turned first to the nearest relatives of the dodo for our supplemental DNA—from the solitaire specimens that are still extant, and from the Nicobar pigeon." Kenneth found himself taking notes on the back of a promotional pamphlet.

A short break, and then it was Petric's turn. Armed with an artist's rendition of the artificial island's ecology, he discussed how he intended the place to become a refuge for other endangered island organisms, from the tambalacoque tree to echo parakeets and pink pigeons. Slides galore illustrated these rare species. Petric seemed to be speaking directly to the representative of the Mauritius Wildlife Appeal Fund sitting in one of the back rows, one of the few officials to have stuck around after lunch. Petric also spent a great deal of time talking about how he was going to prevent the incursion of rats, cats, bilgewater, and invasive plants. Kenneth was impressed by the man's passion for such a daunting and complex task.

Kenneth's own presentation was near the end of the afternoon. "My role is transitional, really," he told the room, before wheeling out one of his prize hens. "To get from genes in a test tube to a real live dodo, you need a foster animal. Obviously, we don't have any live dodos to do the fostering, and we don't have any near relatives that we can turn to either. So we decided to think laterally, and opted for a bird that was of similar dimensions and easy to handle in captivity, preferably entirely domesticated. This is Ninny," he said, gesturing to the hen's cage. "And she's an archaic variety of the domesticated turkey. A little smarter, a little more self-sufficient."

He hefted a turkey egg and displayed it to the crowd of scientists and managers. "It turns out that turkey eggs and dodo eggs are quite similar in size. So it should be quite easy to take an unfertilized turkey egg, inject a dodo blastula, and, with luck, hatch a perfectly viable dodo chick."

Kenneth scanned the faces in the room. Were they paying attention or nodding off? Most seemed to be lending him at least one ear. Good. "Now, if all goes well, we should only need the turkeys for the first generation of dodos. After that, if we can get the birds to breed with each other, the dodo population should be on its way to being self-sustaining. Which is

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our ultimate goal, of course—a self-sustainable artificial island environment, populated by a self-sustainable dodo colony.

"Now the only difficulty," Kenneth said, "is behavioral. We don't know at this point how much dodo behavior is instinctual, and how much is learned. Then again, we know very little about dodo behavior in the first place." Kenneth started counting on his fingers. "We know that they, like many other island birds, were ground nesters—that's one factor that very quickly contributed to their extinction. There are many reports that they ate stones, probably to aid digestion; anyone who's watched chickens ingest gravel will understand what's going on there. The dodo preferred living in the forests. So do my turkeys, I might add; they love scrubby terrain and light tree cover. And that, other than one sailor observing the dodo's appetite to be 'strong and greedy,' is the entirety of our knowledge of dodo behavior. As a result, even if dodo behavior turns out to be mostly learned, at least we won't be losing any data—there's nothing there to begin with, so we have nothing to lose in allowing turkeys to foster our dodos for a generation.

"One more interesting note. Turkeys have already assisted in resuscitating Mauritian biological rarities. You heard my colleague Dr. Ndamase discuss the tambalacoque tree earlier. There's a persistent theory that dodos used to eat the seeds of this tree, and that passing through the digestive system helped these seeds to sprout. There are some reasons to doubt that the dodo was key in this process, but nonetheless, late in the last century Dr. Stanley Temple of the University of Wisconsin tried feeding the pits to a flock of domestic turkeys, and the seeds successfully germinated. So maybe after this, next to the dodo rampant on the Mauritian crest of arms, we should consider adding a turkey. What do you think?" This got a good chuckle out of the few Mauritian officials left in the room, just as Kenneth had intended. The questions were easy and sparse. Kenneth immediately accounted the presentation a success.

Everyone took a short break for tea. There was only one major presentation left to go—the marketing department's. A chance for a nap perhaps, Kenneth thought to himself.

The presentation was slick, as was to be expected. There was lots of stuff about the island becoming a possible tourist attraction, an international nature park. How the artificial island technology might be sold to the excessively rich who might fancy owning an island of their own, that sort of thing.

The marketing department was particularly excited, he learned, about the possibilities for marketing the dodos as housepets—Surita's project. "We've had particularly good test responses to the notion of customizing the birds' look for domestic purposes," the manager continued, and unveiled his slides.

There they were again, the pastel-shaded dodos he'd seen on Surita's screen.

"Ordinarily, dodos are grey, and we certainly expect the park population to retain the original coloration. But as it turns out, it's relatively easy to insert a pigmentation gene into the code, and have them start producing some more interesting and attractive shades. The gene can be

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turned on or off, depending on the preferences of the client. What this means is, we wouldn't need to have separate genetic codes for our 'natural' dodos and our designer dodos, thus simplifying production."

"They're a little large," one of the managers said, "although turning on the pigmentation gene may have some energy costs that we haven't anticipated—the dodos might grow more slowly, or end up a smaller size than expected. This might not be a disadvantage; pint-size dodos might make more manageable pets, in the long run. Some people keep specialty chickens as housepets—even fashioning diapers for them!".This elicited a chuckle from the audience. "Perhaps our esteemed colleague Dr. Yeoh may be able to shed some light upon some of these issues, and we look forward to working with him more closely on this aspect of the project." Kenneth's stomach felt suddenly queasy at the mention of his name.

Kenneth spent the rest of the weekend trying to relax, to fend off visions of rainbow-hued dodos dancing through his head. House-trained dodos. Dodos in diapers. Dodos in giant bell-shaped birdcages, sleek and pudgy. Dodos with canes and monocles, à la *Alice in Wonderland.* Dodos on leashes being walked in the park, harassed by dogs. Dodos everywhere, the latest chic pet, like Dalmatians and Chihuahuas before them. People taking dodos to restaurants, carrying them snug in backpacks. Was this such a horrible fate for an animal that had been extinguished by the hand of man? Wasn't their possible forthcoming ubiquity a sort of poetic justice?

On Monday, he noticed that someone had taped a sign to the front of the commuter bus: "DodoCo." He tried not to brood on the ride to the lab; it was a gorgeous island morning, damp and green and lush.

When he got to the lab, he went downstairs to visit the turkeys. "Would people like you more if you had pink feathers?" he asked one of the hens. She gurgled throatily in reply. He laid his cheek against the mesh of her cage.

"I think I've figured it out, Ginny," he murmured to her. "The pastel dodos are 'improved' only in their relationship to humans—not in relation to their environment in general. It's just the same with you guys. Regular 'improved' domestic turkeys make more meat, which is great for humans, but they can't breed without direct intervention, because the toms can't mount the hens anymore—their breasts get in the way. Similarly, the fancy pastel colors may please the human eye, but if a pet pink dodo got loose on the street, it would be even easier pickings for any cat on the prowl. Or for coyotes—you gals already know about that too well, don't you?

"That's not why I joined this project, is it, Ginny? I'm a throwback; I like you non-improved guys better. And I like the non-improved dodos better. Sure, they exist on our sufferance. I'm okay with that. It's a cool project, trying to reconstruct an extinct organism. It's not fixing our past mistakes, I know that. It's just an experiment. I guess I just have some objections to this particular experimental design.

"The question is, should I just suck it up, or should I do something about it? And if so, what? Is it worth losing my job? Getting sued? Going to jail?"

Ginny clucked softly, cocking an eye at Kenneth. After a few moments, she lost interest again and went to pick at the grain in her trough.

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* * *

Finding Tomila's office turned out to be a challenge in and of itself.

First, he had to locate the machine room. Since almost no one used the machine room except the computer support staff, no one he asked could tell him exactly where it was. It turned out to be in a warehouse on a city-side corner of the shipyard lot.

Finding the machine room was not enough, however. Tomila's office was anchored off a finished space next to the machine room proper; he had to pass through a cavernous space filled with racks of servers humming away in the air conditioning, to an unmarked door, then pass through a small room stacked with jumbles of cables and spare parts, and head to the back of that room to another unmarked door with a glass panel set into it. This was Tomila's office; inside was a desk, a workstation, a one-way window onto the server room, and not much else other than the brooding Cossack herself.

"Why didn't you call?" were her first words to him.

"This isn't official business. Mind if I sit down?" She shrugged; Kenneth dropped into the only spare seat, a green vinyl armchair that looked as if it belonged in a school somewhere.

Tomila's work space was alarmingly lacking in personal effects. A small cactus stood in one corner of her desk, an antique rifle was mounted on the wall, and a framed print of Brulov's "The Lady Horseman" faced it from the opposite wall.

"If you're here to ask for a date, I'm not interested. I don't approve of office romance," Tomila said, bringing a smile to Kenneth's face.

"No, it's not that either," Kenneth said.

"Well, then, what?" Tomila turned to face him, hands on her slim hips.

Suddenly, Kenneth was tongue-tied. "I don't know if I can trust you with this," he managed to stammer out.

In response, Tomila collapsed into a chair with an exasperated explosion of breath. She crossed her arms and stared at him. "I don't know if you can trust me either," she said finally, "because I don't know what this is about. If you're not going to tell me, then leave."

"Okay," Kenneth said. "Fair enough." Then, "What did you think of marketing's little plan they presented at the meeting last week?"

"What is this, small talk?"

"Humor me."

Tomila sighed. "It was boring. And the colored birds were ugly."

"I didn't like them either."

"So?"

"So I'm thinking of doing something about it."

Tomila leaned forward in her chair, resting her elbows on her thighs. "Oh, are you? And what do you think you can do? Going to talk to the Marketing Director? He won't listen to you."

"No."

"So, what then?" There was a gleam in her eye. "Sabotage?"

"Not exactly."

Tomila rolled her eyes.

Kenneth persisted. "Something a little more subtle. I don't want the

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project to fail; I just want the opportunity for it to follow a slightly different direction elsewhere." She raised an eyebrow. "Promise me that if nothing comes of this, you won't tell upper management."

"Tell them what?" Tomila leaned back in her chair and spread her arms. "We're just talking."

Kenneth took a deep breath. "I want to smuggle out some of the dodos. Dodo embryos, actually."

Tomila burst out laughing. "Impossible. And besides, for what purpose? What good would it do?"

"I checked," Kenneth said. "They're not bothering to register the DNA of the first generation of birds, since they're just test models, essentially. The first batch, they're the blank template, the experimental control. They're going to make sure the basic, rough reconstruction works before fiddling with additions like pigmentation. Before they refine the product."

"So that means what?"

"I want to get my hands on the unpatented template. I want to raise a generation of dodos free of the pigmentation gene—and free of any of the other human-friendly 'improvements' they're intending to introduce."

"Like your turkeys," Tomila said.

"Exactly."

"But why?"

Kenneth rubbed his temple gently. "It's hard to explain. I thought that you might understand, after our first conversation. . . ."

"Fish corn," Tomila said simply.

"Yes."

Tomila nodded. "And how can I help?"

"You have access to the records," Kenneth said.

"Ah?"

"And you can change them."

"If I'm careful."

Kenneth smiled. "I wouldn't expect any less."

Tomila folded her fingers together. "I could do this. But if I do, what good will it do for you?"

"I have a ranch back home, full of turkeys. Turkeys that lay eggs week in and week out. Nobody will notice a few eggs out of the ordinary. Not until they've hatched into fluffy little dodo chicks, at least."

"They won't be dodos," Tomila said. "They'll be turkey-dos."

"Nothing will ever be a real dodo again," Kenneth said. "Turkey-dos, pastel-dos, I suppose it doesn't make much of a difference, in the end."

"It does to you," Tomila said, as gently as she'd ever spoken.

"Yes. It makes enough of a difference for me to risk my job, my career—heck, I could get arrested for this! It's stealing, even if it's not intellectual property, it is physical property."

"Is it?" Tomila asked. "The turkeys, they are contractors, aren't they? They still belong to you."

"I'd need an egg," Kenneth said. "If we were working with mammals, I could maybe smuggle out a pregnant mother and get away with it, just maybe."

"You don't need an egg," said Tomila. "Just a hen. And a . . . blastula?"

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Kenneth nodded. "The step before an embryo, yes. More than one, actually, if I expect to have a viable population."

Tomila turned abruptly to her workstation. She typed in a few commands and then turned back to face him. "I could get these for you," she said. "I think. If I do it right. It's tricky. But I could do it."

"How?" Kenneth said.

"Like you said. I change the records. Bad batch, has to be thrown out. You intercept. Simple." She lifted her chin, thinking. "That hardest part is getting to the batch before they discard it, but I have some ideas. The second hardest part is getting the batch to. . . ?" She cocked her head in question.

"New Mexico," Kenneth supplied.

"Never been," Tomila said. Kenneth tried not to fidget in his chair while she stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. "It appeals to my sense of mischief. And it is a challenge. Much more interesting than maintaining the servers for a bunch of dull geneticists and getting hit on by amorous nautical engineers." She stood up. "Yes, I will help you."

"Go apply for some vacation time," she said, "and let me work. I'll let you know when the samples are ready."

The centerpiece of the Dodo Factory was a gigantic DNA library, housed in the center building of the shipyard, on the first floor of the converted warehouse that everyone (except possibly the genetics staff themselves) called "the geneticists' hive." The geneticists were the worker bees, and Kenneth had come to regard the library, these last few days, as a giant pot of honey.

The library's database was managed by one of the big servers that fell under Tomila's supervision. "It should be simple," Tomila had told him. "I will schedule a set of blastulas to be destroyed as tainted. You just have to intercept the batch before they take it to the incinerator."

Kenneth tried to ignore the "Mission: Impossible" theme that had lodged itself in his head. The situation hardly warranted such melodrama, he told himself. Sure, technically he was engaging in corporate espionage, but it was really only a minor act of theft. Simple theft. No elaborate security hacking, no gadgets, no disguises. It was just a matter of timing.

Which had turned out to be trickier than either he or Tomila had expected. "What, don't they take the discards to the incinerator on a regular schedule?" the system administrator had cried, thumping her desk with her hand. "Idiots."

"They probably don't have enough waste to justify a regular pickup," said Kenneth.

"Unlike you and your little biohazard factories," Tomila groused.

The young woman at the front desk waved him by with a smile when he flashed her his badge. All the scientists had full access to every laboratory space, in the interests of fostering cooperation and synergy between various branches of the project. This was the easy part.

The hard part was maintaining his cool, not arousing suspicions. Kenneth knew now that he wasn't suited for a life of espionage. The irrational part of him was already convinced that he had CRIMINAL tattooed in letters of sweat on his forehead.

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The DNA library was, essentially, an automated storage facility, situated on the first floor of the Hive—for easy access, of course. Tomila, thanks to her role as computer shepherd, had access to its brain, and he had access to the room it was contained in, courtesy of his magic green "scientist" badge.

He had access to the room, but he didn't have access to the contents of the library itself. That was where Tomila came in. He also had the thinnest of excuses as to why he was even in the building.

But if all went smoothly, that wouldn't matter. No one except the girl at the door would see him. No one would mark his presence. In and out, easy enough. That's what Tomila had told him, and that's what he repeated to himself, under his breath, as he tried to keep his heart rate under control, as he tried to look calm, to keep from wiping his palms nervously on his lab coat.

Tomila had laughed at his coat when he'd donned it. "What are those stains?" she asked, pointing to the dim yellow streaks.

"You don't want to know," he scowled.

"Turkey shit," she guessed, and it was the first time he had ever seen a smile on her face.

Kenneth started counting his steps. His shoulders dropped. So far, so good. The corridor was empty. He'd heard no one else nearby. The door to the library was in sight, just opposite a set of swinging bathroom doors.

Someone stepped out of the men's room and practically plowed into his chest before looking up in surprise.

The man, shorter than Kenneth, graying at the temples, and wearing a stylishly erudite-looking pair of glasses, squinted at Kenneth's ID badge. "Dr. Yeoh?" he said. "The turkey man, right? I enjoyed your presentation the other day. Very informative. I'm Dr. Rishevsky." He gestured at his own badge, then extended his hand. Kenneth shook it with determination. "What are you doing here?" Dr. Rishevsky asked. "Aren't your labs somewhere else on the campus?"

Kenneth swallowed slowly, arranging the words in his mind. "I had some questions for . . . for Dr. Francis," he said, plucking a name from his memory of the presentations. An amiable-seeming professor from the Eastern American seaboard, Dr. Emily Francis was leading the embryonic development team, if he recalled correctly. "About growth factors. I want to make sure that the dodo embryo rate of growth and that of the turkey embryos match. If they don't, the dodos could grow too slowly and need help out of the egg, or they could grow too quickly and end up premature or stunted. So I think we need to strategize." The words just started spilling out of his mouth. Kenneth hoped that the babble was convincing—a man excited about his research, he told himself, not a nervous man covering up for something.

"Ah." Dr. Rishevsky grimaced theatrically. "Wish I could help you, but I'm on the plumage project. Sounds fascinating, however. So you think you'll be ready to inoculate the eggs soon?"

"I hope so," Kenneth said. "But like I said, I have to talk to Dr. Francis first."

"Of course. Her office is on the third floor, if I recall correctly," Dr. Ri-

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shevsky said, pointing back toward the bank of elevators near the check-in post.

"Thanks," Kenneth said, slowly clenching and unclenching his hands in the pockets of his lab coat. He glanced in the direction that Dr. Rishevsky was pointing, then back down the corridor, over Rishevsky's shoulder. He smiled at the geneticist and took one step forward.

"Oh, I'm sorry, please excuse me," Dr. Rishevsky said, and stepped away from the men's room door. "Good luck with your project," he said, heading down the hall. Kenneth waved and stepped into the restroom.

All he wanted to do was lean against the door and take about twenty or so deep, slow breaths, but Kenneth was afraid that if he did so, someone else would walk in and surprise him. So he walked deliberately to the sink, turned the faucet on full, and splashed his face with cold water. He rubbed his forehead and temples roughly with his fingertips, then toweled off and stared at himself in the mirror. You have every right to be here, he told himself. Nobody has any reason to suspect you of anything. You're a scientist.

He stepped out of the restroom and slid his ID badge smartly through the slot next to the door of the DNA lab across the hall. The lock released smoothly. Kenneth was inside.

The large, cool room betrayed the building's industrial origins with its semi-unfinished state. The library itself was essentially a gigantic freezer with a server and database attached. It provided automated storage and retrieval of the hundreds of bar-coded DNA samples, embryos, and blastulas that the geneticists had to keep track of.

Any samples marked "discard," the library pulled and dumped in a special bin. A lab assistant came by to empty the bin once or twice a day, filling a big red biohazard trash bag with polymer test tubes and backup cards and sending it to the local incinerator. All Kenneth had to do was retrieve the blastulas that Tomila had earmarked for incineration, before the lab attendant did.

Kenneth donned a pair of nitrile gloves, mostly out of habit, before opening up the discard window.

Inside were five trays of polymer test tubes, all alike.

"Shit!" Kenneth exclaimed softly. Foolishly, he had expected only one.

He fumbled in his pocket for the scrap of paper where he'd written down the ID numbers Tomila had provided. There. It was the third tray, in the back. Twelve little test tubes, each with a proto-dodo embedded inside it.

Kenneth opened his bag and took out a Styrofoam insulator. Gingerly he slid the tray inside. "Don't worry, dodo babies, it only looks like I'm eating you for lunch," he whispered as he popped the lid on. "You're going to a new home, and your turkey mamas will take good care of you, I promise. It's an adventure, isn't it?" He zipped up the bag, closed the disposal window, and stripped off his gloves. "And it's not over yet. Not quite."

The Styrofoam tray only needed to stay in his bungalow's freezer for a few hours; he doubted Anders would notice anything.

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Kenneth's biggest regret about his scheme was that he needed prepared blastulas, ready for implantation. This meant carrying frozen samples through customs—Tomila and Kenneth had settled on a lunch thermos and ice packs as least likely to attract attention. They were taking a risk that the samples would spoil if Kenneth hit any delays, but any other course of action was even less likely to succeed—and more likely to get them both arrested.

Some spy I would make, he thought, not for the first time. I thought this espionage stuff was supposed to be exhilarating, an adrenaline thrill.

If he'd had access to lab facilities back home, he could have merely stolen a backup DNA sample card. Those were stored at room temperature; it would be so easy to use one as a bookmark, no one would ever notice. But he had no way of preparing the DNA stored on the card into a cell, much less inducing cell division and embryo formation. All that required a fully functional genetics laboratory. All Kenneth had back home was his turkey ranch. He certainly didn't plan to let anyone else in on his scheme, not before he'd hatched his first batch of dodo chicks. Heck, he was still uncomfortable trusting Tomila, his only other conspirator. She could turn him in at any time. She still might. She might have set him up for a really big fall, possibly out of loyalty, possibly just for sport.

The airport was much further than he'd remembered, a two-hour bus ride to the other side of the island. He kept in mind that he'd spent most of the time on his first trip chatting happily with Surita. He would miss her. He had last seen her on the beach, swaying to the rhythms of the sega band that had closed the presentations of that weekend, not so long ago.

The last man to join the sparse crew heading to the airport, to Kenneth's surprise, was Petric. Hurtling for the door just before the driver pulled out of the parking lot, Petric tossed his bag into the overhead rack, caught sight of Kenneth sitting alone near the back, and broke into a huge smile. Swaying as he navigated the narrow center aisle, Petric hailed him before the ecologist was even halfway to the seat. Kenneth's heart started racing.

"Dr. Turkey Man! Heading home so soon?" Petric dropped into the seat across the aisle.

Kenneth attempted a nonchalant shrug. "Holidays." He clutched his bag tighter, and hoped Petric didn't notice. He fought the urge to check on his package. Petric's sunny demeanor wouldn't melt his samples, he told himself. But it might arouse his suspicion.

"Holidays? In late November?"

"American Thanksgiving." Kenneth couldn't help a smile. "A very important day for turkey ranchers, you know."

As he expected, this elicited a hearty laugh from Petric. "You are going to go reassure your birds that their necks aren't destined for the block, eh?"

Kenneth nodded. "And I made sure that my lab assistant here was prepared to deal with any ex-pats who might get the wrong idea into their heads." Through force of will, he managed to relax his grip on his laptop. "So what's your excuse?"

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"Family emergency." For the first time since they'd met, Petric seemed somber. "Nothing serious, don't worry." He seemed disinclined to talk further about the subject. Soon the ecologist was napping calmly in his seat. Kenneth envied Petric his serenity. He had a suspicion that he himself would be wide awake for every one of the dozen or so hours it would take for him to get back to his ranch.

The moment Kenneth had expected to be most nerve-wracking turned out to pass without incident—customs and airport security didn't bother to give more than a cursory glance at his lunch pack and thermos. Of course, it passed through the X-ray without incident, and surely no one was expecting biological samples to be stashed like hot soup. Kenneth simultaneously gained new respect for international smugglers, and marveled at how easy it was to slip through the net. Then again, airport personnel were looking for drugs and weapons primarily, environmental contaminants secondarily. Nobody expected his kind of illegal cargo. Hardly anybody cared.

He kept his fingers crossed that there weren't too many intercontinental delays. God forbid his flight got canceled for some reason; he'd end up with some exotic thawed embryos in his thermos instead of viable organisms, and all his effort would have been for nothing.

But there were no delays; everything went smoothly. By the time most of the day had passed, he was on his way back to the ranch, dozing in the back of his brother's car.

Two weeks after arriving home, he sent email to his supervisor asking permission to take an extended family leave for a few months. It was granted. After the chicks hatched at the Factory facility in Mauritius, he knew that his role would be much less important. It would have been interesting, watching the dodo chicks interact with their foster parents, but he was going to have that opportunity now anyway.

Kenneth knew he wouldn't be able to keep his deception a secret forever. Eventually, someone would notice the fluffy gray chicks toddling around his ranch. Eventually, he would have to resign from the project entirely. But by then, the non-improved dodos would be a fait accompli. At least, that was the plan.

Over Christmas, he received a card. The return address was from Mauritius; if he was reading the scrawled handwriting right, it was from Tomila.

Christmas greetings didn't exactly seem her style. Frowning, Kenneth tore open the bright red envelope.

Inside was an entirely tasteful "Season's Greetings" card. And tucked inside that was a card full of suspended DNA samples—Kenneth recognized the series of circular wells right away. The card could be kept at room temperature indefinitely without the samples degrading in quality. He now had a complete set of non-improved dodo DNA backups. Just in case.

"Merry Christmas," the text of the card read. "Here's a little present to help you with your new year's projects. If we were lucky, this is redundant." There were details as to the strain's origin included as well.

He smiled and pinned the card to his mantelpiece.

Leave it to a system administrator to mail him a backup. ○

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THE DEVIL YOU DON'T

Matthew Hughes

Matthew Hughes is best known for his far future "Archonate" stories—*Black Brillion* (Tor, 2004), and *Fools Errant* and *Fool Me Twice* (Warner Aspect, 2001)—which have a strong flavor of Jack Vance. In his latest tale, though, Mr. Hughes offers a classic time travel scenario: what if you could go back and influence one of the great figures of history? The author's web page is at *www.archonate.com*.

The frantic sparks fly up into the November night like lost souls seeking safe harbor, who, finding none, extinguish themselves against the unheeding darkness. Or so I might write it if ever I should put pen to paper to tell this tale. But I shall not.

The fire itself is confined by the blackened steel barrel. I poke again with the gardener's fork, and another flurry of sparks shoots up, and, with them, scraps of burning paper. By the flickering light of the flames, I can sometimes see a printed word or two before they are consumed: *Alamein, Rommel, Singapore, Yalta.*

The books are thick. They will take time to burn but I have learned patience. I have always taken the longer view. Perhaps it is a sense of history. Perhaps it is just how I am formed. But, in the arena of public life, he who takes the longer view must win out in the end.

The gardener has left in heaps his cullings from the bygone summer's flower beds. I gather another armful of dried stalks and withered blossoms and throw them onto the flames. The flare of light illuminates the disturbed earth that the gardener turned over this afternoon and the pile of red bricks that have lain here much longer—more than a year since I abandoned building a wall to take Mr. Chamberlain's reluctant call.

First Lord of the Admiralty, then. Prime Minister now. It was what I

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had always wanted, I will admit, though I would have preferred its arrival under less perilous circumstances.

The books are burning well. I leave them and kneel beside the wall. The cement with which to mix the mortar is just where I left it and there is water at hand. I lay a red fired brick atop the black soil, trowel its side with mortar, then place a second beside it.

Another pass with the trowel, then another brick. The work proceeds as it always did, a step at a time. That is how walls are built. As are lives. And futures.

The man appeared from thin air. I wanted to think he had stepped out of the darkness, but the space behind him was well-lit by the lights of Chartwell's great house, my house. I had not been here since the start of the war.

"Please don't be alarmed," he said.

"I am alarmed," I said. "My visitors usually make less startling entrances, and then only when invited."

"I mean you no harm."

"I am relieved to hear it."

"I've come from the future."

"Now I am alarmed anew," I said.

There was a policeman in the house, a Special Branch man with a pistol. But I did not call out. My visitor begged me to allow him to demonstrate his bona fides.

I did so and was soon convinced. He had a watch that displayed time through ingenious means and a device no larger than a calling card that could extract a square root in the blink of an eye. He showed me coins and paper money bearing the likeness of the young Princess Elizabeth, grown grandmotherly beneath the Crown of State.

"I am glad to know that the royal family endures," I said. "You bring me a heartening sign when one is sorely needed."

"I have brought you more than signs," he said. "I have brought you wonders."

He produced a package of books, small paperbound editions such as I had not seen before. I took them in my hands. The titles had a ring to them: *The Gathering Storm, Their Finest Hour, Blood, Sweat and Tears.*

Then I saw the name of the author. It was mine own.

"What are these?" I said.

"Your memoirs," he said. "The war years, at least."

"Then I survive," I said.

"More than that. You win."

"I am glad to hear it."

"It was touch-and-go for a while," he said. "But that was not the worst of it."

"Oh? Then what was the worst of it?"

I have not often seen a man look so forlorn. "The cost," he said. "The sheer waste. The horror."

I did not know how to comfort him. I set the books down on a heap of bricks, then brought out cigars and offered him one. He seemed delighted

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to take it. His face shed its melancholy and he exhibited an exhilaration I have seen only in the shining eyes of schoolboys encountering their idols on the sidelines of a cricket pitch.

"I knew you would be here tonight, alone," he said, when he had puffed his cigar alight. He had studied my life, he said, choosing a night when I had come to the old place, away from memoranda and telephones and committees, to wrestle with my old black dog of a mood that had gripped me since the terrible raid on Coventry two nights ago.

He savored the rich Cuban leaf, blew out a long stream of blue smoke, then said, "But now you can stop all of it before it happens—the Blitz, the Battle of the Atlantic." He looked wistful for a moment, then continued. "My mother's younger brother drowned when his ship was torpedoed off Newfoundland in 1942. Fifty years later, she still cried for him."

"I am very sorry," I said.

"But you see, now he doesn't have to die," he said, gesturing to the books with the hand that held the cigar so that a scattering of ash fell upon the cover of the one entitled *The Hinge of Fate.* "It's all in there. Hitler's plans, his blunders. His invasion of Russia, D-Day, all of it."

I looked at the books atop the bricks but did not touch them.

"Now you can strike where he is weakest, shorten the war, save tens of millions of lives."

"Are there others like you?" I asked. "Other travelers through time?"

He told me that the channels by which he had come back to me were abstruse, unknown to any other. He had hit upon time travel by the most outrageous twist of odds. "But once I knew I could come here, I had to," he said. "The war was the most terrible thing that ever happened. But with these books, you can prevent the worst of it."

"Hmmm," I said. "Show me."

He bent to retrieve one of the volumes. I reached for a brick.

I mortar a second layer of bricks over the first, tapping each carefully into line with its brothers. The man from the future lies with his wonders beneath the fire-hardened oblongs. His books are ashes now.

I wonder if he understood, as the light was going out of his eyes, that I must accept all the horrors to come. That is the price to be paid for the knowledge he had brought me, the knowledge that we will be able to endure and that then will come brighter days.

But would they still come if I had looked into those books? If I could see the present as the past through my own future eyes, would I not surely wander from the path that I now tread in darkness, though with a good hope that it will lead us eventually to those broad sunny uplands?

I must choose the devil I know, though I know him now to be even more horrid than I feared, because the devil I don't know may well be even worse.

Yet the man from the future has not striven in vain. He has done much good. Because of him, my black dog is once more whipped back to his dark kennel.

I finish the second layer of bricks, stand and brush the dirt from the knees of my trousers. I lay the trowel on the unyielding surface.

I shall carry on. We shall see it through. O

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HONEY MOON

It had seemed like
such a romantic idea
to have the wedding
on the moon but
during the ceremony
the bridesmaids all wore
ghastly blue pressure suits
and the groom's helmet
tilted oddly away
from the bride
who suddenly felt
light-headed in one-sixth gee
but nevertheless endured
a profound sinking heart
seeing her husband-to-be's
eyes wide behind his visor
and his gaze roaming longingly
over the smooth cool powder
of Luna's silver-gray flesh
her exquisite inviting skin
like dry gasps of wonder.

—Mario Milosevic

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Apropos of nothing, R. Neube tells us, "There's a reason I am a pedestrian. I was walking down the street the other day working on some dialogue for a story. Walked into a telephone pole. I only bled a little. The other day on a Greyhound bus, I watched a guy shooting down the highway while he read a book. I love readers, but . . . but when I hit a telephone pole, I only bleed a little. THINK PEOPLE!" On the other hand, an increase in the number of people reading while driving would probably result in a flood on the market described in . . .

ORGANS R US

R. Neube

As I lifted my cheeseburger, the muzzle of a shotgun tickled my ear. Now I understood why the greasy spoon had gotten abruptly quiet. I slowly set my hands and burger on the table before looking at the gunman.

The sheriff's uniform needed a dry cleaner in the worst way, to judge from its summer mix of sweat and road dust.

"Is the bacon on my cheeseburger a nutritional felony in this neck of the woods?"

"You are an organ buyer, are you *not?*" she asked through clenched teeth.

"Yes, sir, ma'am. I have ID from the National Institute of Health." I added another "Sir," hoping her finger might lift off the trigger. It wasn't uncommon being harassed by the local law. Folks hated organ buyers.

"Where were you last night between nine and eleven P.M.?" she demanded.

"Dining with Sheriff Begley and his family down in Knott County. I arrived at seven, left a little after midnight. You can call while I'm eating. Here, use my phone. It's inside my necessary bag."

"Your what?"

"Necessary bag." I pointed slowly at the weathered canvas bag I often called my mobile office.

"I know Glenn Begley. If you're lying, I—"

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"His father and I went to college together. My late wife was Glenn's godmother. I played chess with him and his daughters all night."

"He is crazy about chess," conceded the sheriff.

She lowered her shotgun before sliding into the opposite side of the booth. I handed over my phone, along with my ID packet.

The sheriff harrumphed. "Cell phones are no good in this end of the county, old man."

I ignored her attitude. "Mine is linked through the communications array in my hovercraft." I pointed at my elephantine ride in the parking lot. "It's vital for a person in my line of business to stay in touch. If a lunatic poisons a reservoir in California, the price of kidneys and livers will go through the roof on the Chicago Exchange. If there's an outbreak of TB-3 in Atlanta, the price of lungs will soar."

The sheriff nodded as she dialed. I consumed my cheeseburger and fries, relishing the extra grease that bespoke of home cooking.

"Your alibi holds up," she announced after the call. "I apologize, Citizen Lansing. We've suffered a rash of murders where the victims had their organs stolen. And, lo, a traveling organ buyer arrives in my county! Worth investigating, don't you think?" She held out her hand. "I'm Sheriff Carr."

She was one of those raw-boned redheads the Appalachian Mountains produced as a bumper crop. Scarred and calloused hands told me that she kept the family farm going on the side. Obsidian eyes stared through me. They were puffy and bloodshot , which hinted that it had been a long time since she'd gotten a solid night's sleep. Her pale skin was as sunburnt as it could get, a rose tint dotted with freckles. I would bet that skin cancer ran in her family, and those petite scars on her right cheek were spots that had been excised by a surgeon.

"A murderer stealing organs?" I asked while I mimed to the waitress to fetch me a slice of a steaming pie freshly deposited on the counter. "Certainly not for sale."

"Pray tell, how could you know that?"

"I have two million dollars worth of hardware in my hover that says so. Half the population suffers from one or more of the hundred and seventy-three diseases that make their organs worthless for transplant. People like me. I'm suffering from Pryor Syndrome. It only infects my lungs, but nobody would take my kidneys or liver on the stray chance they might harbor that viral timebomb."

"But—"

I waved her silent. "Despite the advances in transplant tech, a recipient still has to undergo immune suppressant therapy, allowing an infected organ to spread its disease through a patient's body. I test my donors comprehensively in order to insure that their organs are worth buying."

"But the news—"

I suppressed the urge to scream. "Those bands of organ thieves leaving a vacationer in a tub of ice with a note to call 9-1-1 are urban mythology. The FBI has yet to find evidence of a single crime like that." I shook my head. "Use your brain for one frigging minute. It requires a ton of people to transplant even the simplest organ. Hell, why would the rich hire crooks to steal organs when organs are for *sale* on the open market?"

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"Settle down, old man."

I shrugged. "Sorry, but that street myth has been a royal pain in the ass for me. Last year, a mob tried to lynch me in Thames County for stealing organs."

"There are fools everywhere," said the sheriff, flicking at the wisps of red hair that were escaping from beneath her hat.

"What do the forensic mavens say?" I asked.

The sheriff laughed. "You've got to be kidding! Charleston doesn't care what happens in Mingo County. Since the state went bankrupt—"

"I'm in West Virginia?"

"You don't know what *state* you're in?" She rolled her eyes. "I thought your zillion-dollar hover out there had all the electronics in the world."

"My GPS is on the fritz. I've been waiting for the next time I kick into a city to get it replaced."

"How did you get across the Tug Fork River? The bridge has been out for years."

"That's why I own a hover, to get to places off the beaten track. Organs are healthier in the boondocks."

"You can't tell east from west?" Contempt rolled from her words.

I cringed at my stupidity, scratching at my thinning brown hair. "It was overcast."

Her body language told me that she'd crowned me as the new village idiot. That stuck in my craw, provoking an insane urge to prove myself to her.

"So, you getting *any* help from the outside on this case?" I asked.

She wiped her brow. The skin normally covered by her hat was as pale as a corpse. "Four murders this month. The coroner of Kanawha County was going to come down on his own dime to give the victims a look-see, then that airliner crashed up there Friday, so he has a morgueful of work."

"What about your own coroner?"

"Our county went bankrupt before the state did. Doctor Linwood moved after his paycheck bounced. I haven't been paid in ten months."

"I can help," I blurted.

She waved at the waitress, pointing at my coffee. The waitress shook her head. Throwing a thumb over her shoulder drew my attention to a large, glowering guy behind the cash register.

The sheriff nodded. "Put it on his tab."

"Sure. Any woman with a shotgun gets her coffee on me."

Sheriff Carr guzzled the coffee the instant it arrived. My pie had been sliced with the aid of an electron microscope; I had snacked on bigger crumbs. On the other hand, it was delicious.

After an awkward silence, she asked, "How could you possibly help my investigation?"

"Over the past eighteen years, I have removed nearly four thousand organs, using virtually every robotic surgical system on the market. Working the boondock circuit, I have rendered first aid, even delivered babies." I swallowed hard on that one. Whoa, had I been out of my league! I coughed the knot from my throat. "I'm as close to a doctor as some people see in their lifetime, a sad statement about the twenty-first century."

"Citizen Lansing, I—"

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"No, let me finish. Maybe I can't tell you a thing, but maybe I can generate a clue or two."

"What have I got to lose?" She threw a penny on the table. "There, you are my paid deputy for the day. Follow me to Belo. And don't hit anything in that tank of yours."

I dropped a fifty on the table for the thirty dollar check. Everything was cheaper in the boondocks.

The roads hadn't seen a coat of asphalt in decades. The police car bounced from one pothole to the next, occasionally throwing off a part. My computer told me nothing about the town of Belo. However, a long report came from my query on Mingo County. A flood six years ago had devastated the county seat of Williamson, right as the state and nation slammed into the bankruptcy brick wall. An outbreak of TB-3 caused the remnants of the population to flee.

Hard luck. The hills bred stories like this faster than rabbits.

How had I ended up in West Virginia? At least when Kentucky went bankrupt, a mad billionaire had bought the state government, saving the commonwealth from the hell that West Virginia suffered. I could harvest a lot of organs from purgatory; I had doubts about harvesting from hell.

I cursed my pride that had inspired me to volunteer. Maybe I was getting too old for life on the road. This fall, I would be eighty; maybe it was time to quit.

The town of Belo was impossibly green, trees and gardens everywhere. Every house appeared freshly painted. I was growing optimistic until we stopped at an old fast-food restaurant whose windows now sported poorly rendered police badges in cheap, peeling paint. A partially dismantled patrol car stood on blocks in the parking lot.

The bodies were in a walk-in freezer that clunked and wheezed when the sheriff opened the door. The two males and two females had been in rigor when they were frozen. They had been posed for whomever found them, that much was clear. There had been no mechanical help in harvesting the organs. It was butcher's work. More telling, none of the lungs were touched.

"The killer is right-handed. The victims were banged on the head before they were gutted." I pointed at the obvious wounds.

"Tell me something I don't know."

Not a year went by without an outbreak of TB-3. Lungs were the gold standard of an organ buyer. I had thirty in cryogenic storage, my hoard waiting for the next epidemic, when I could sell them on the Chicago Exchange for top dollar.

Withdrawing my Uniprobe scraper, I took samples from each of the victims. Led the sheriff back to my hover. She said nothing, but her eyes grew large at the array of technology.

"I do this little presentation for donors who are scared." Dragged out a medical school mannequin, and set the robotic surgeon working, showing her how the drone harvested organs. Meanwhile, I fed the samples into the analyzer, taking care not to cross-contaminate them.

"I had no idea the . . . procedure could be that quick," she said as the drone removed the mannequin's left kidney.

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"You are looking at a Hughes MD-XIX, from ultrasonics to lasers, from probes to antibiotic dispensing jets, the finest on the market. A kidney in three minutes, a lung in ten. Most of my donors suffer worse from a hangover."

I took the mock kidney from the drone's paw. It was a first-class simulation; no real kidney looked that good. I pointed into the demonstrator mannequin. "No surgeon could make an incision that small. Your killer didn't bother to try. He's a butcher, experienced gutting deer or pigs."

"But the wounds were so clean."

"The killer could have done the cutting in a bathtub with the water running."

The sheriff paced through my hovercraft. "Incredible how spacious this is."

"My home on the road."

"Where do you live when you aren't ghouling around?"

Ghoul. The pejorative was a slap in my face. Yet when I looked at her, I wasn't angry. I felt her pain. This killer was killing her. She knew that she was beat.

"Here," I replied.

"Don't you have a real life?"

"Are you hungry? Thirsty?" I opened the wine cabinet. When I turned around with a bottle of Merlot, she was gone.

A thunk, thunk, thunk announced water flowing into the jacket around my vehicle's reactor shield to pick up a quick boil. I pondered whether to warn her about the water in the shower coming out scalding, but her yelp beat me to the punch.

I opened the bottle, then wandered into the cockpit. I linked with the feds' database, ironically enough located in West Virginia, trying to learn about Mingo County.

The sheriff emerged from the bathroom to interrupt my research. "Is this washing machine functional?"

"Only the GPS is broke. Do you always steal showers?"

"No hot water at the station."

Stepping into the bathroom, she reappeared in seconds dressed in my robe. She stuffed her uniform in the washing machine. I raced to work the controls. The machine functioned, but I still hadn't reassembled the controls from my last repair, so I had to cross wires to get it going.

She noticed my puzzled stare. "I am not the most popular person in the county. After the third murder, vigilantes burnt my house down. I've been living in the office. Nobody is giving me credit. People I've known all my life are shunning me. I have six liters of gas left in my patrol car, then I'm walking."

"Maybe you ought to learn a going vocation—like panhandling."

"What do you have to eat?"

As spam fried, I exploded some potatoes in the microwave. She scarfed them down. I nuked an ear of corn and fried my last two eggs. She scarfed them down. I broke out crackers and peanut butter. Along the way, she guzzled two bottles of Merlot. By the time her uniform was dry, the sheriff snoozed on my couch.

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I scanned the Charleston paper via the 'link. The murder spree merited two mentions, both about the third killing. The articles railed more about the failings of rural law enforcement than they provided facts about the crime.

After tossing a blanket over my guest, I wandered outside to be slapped by the summer swelter. Inside the station, it felt like an oven. The murder files waited atop her desk. A yellowed Geological Survey map on the wall sported pins to show the murder scenes.

The secret of solving crime was noticing what was out of place. Ma had worked as a forensic accountant. The stories of deductive reasoning I learned on her knee were better than a criminology degree.

I read the files. The first victim had lived on Sutton Road. Went to the map. The West Fork of Twelvepole Creek ran beside Sutton Road. The other killings had been in the south end of the county, as far as they could be from the first.

Upon my return to the hover, I found the sheriff sitting at the table, eating more crackers and drinking more of my wine. Much to my relief, it was a cheap bottle.

"What's the best price? Kidney? Lung?" she asked, eyes on the verge of crossing.

"Huh?"

"I'm broke. My department is broke. I'm out of gas. If I had the money, I could hire someone to help. I—"

I replied, "The liver is one of the most marvelous organs in the body. How often do you get drunk?"

"This is the first time this year." She was weaving in the chair so much, she gradually crept to its edge.

"If your liver is healthy, I can snip a quarter of it and you won't notice." I coughed the exaggeration loose from my tight throat. "Won't notice much. In a few months, it grows back. I plop your fragment in a nutrient bath, and in a few months that snip doubles in size. You can pop it into a person and the fragment becomes a fully functional liver. It's the big bargain. If you and your liver are healthy, I can give you—"

My brain forced my mouth shut. Professional liver donors had glutted the market, despite the spate of new designer drugs that killed hundreds of thousands of livers belonging to rich party monsters. At the best of times, I could barely get two grand for a liver snip.

Yet, my mouth said, "I can give you five thousand."

"What about a lung? How much?"

"You can walk out of here after I take a lung. Barely. It will take you days to recover, even with the drugs I give you."

"I am the last elected official still serving my county. The others quit when the money did. My deputies are gone; I have DNA evidence I can't afford to send to a lab. The only thing between the killer and victim five is me. And I need money!"

"I can give you fifty-five thou for your lung."

She moaned.

"Sixty-five."

"My people are dying because I am incompent."

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"Incom-what?"

She waved the empty bottle at me. "I need to pay for DNA analysis. I need to save my people." Whereupon she fell out of the chair. The snore came a few seconds later.

I left the sheriff on the floor. Raked the Uniprobe across her forearm. A pale mark on her finger indicated where her wedding ring had been. Pawned? My finger spun mine, evoking dusty memories of my dead spouse. My sigh went on forever.

My tissue analyzer was already full. I'd forgotten about the samples from the victims. The Glek-Hansen read the DNA and sundry hormones and enzymes from the donor. It never ceased to amaze me how a drop of blood, a shred of flesh, could tell such a comprehensive story of a person's well-being.

Or in this case, bad-being.

The disease was as old as the industrial revolution, though it had only been given a name shortly after the turn of the century—SCS, Systemic Cancer Syndrome. Workers exposed to toxic waste, or simply those who lived near the waste, suffered multiple cancers. Whereas most cancers slowly migrated through bodies, SCS victims bloomed tumors everywhere at once.

All the victims had it.

I cleaned my Glek-Hansen twice while I contemplated the meaning of the SCS. Popped the sheriff's sample into the analyzer before I returned to her office. The murder files were painstaking in their detail. Sheriff Carr sought a common denominator beyond the usual rural everybody-knowing-everything-about-everyone. She had tracked the first three victims back to grade school; there were even lists of cousins and other relatives.

I scrutinized the wall map. That first killing was out of place. I checked that file. No occupation listed would expose the victim to toxins sufficient to cause SCS. Same with the other three.

Could it be the water? I wondered. It wouldn't be the first time that toxic waste buried illegally in the twentieth century leached into a reservoir and mass-poisoned a region. Such cases had generated a scandal a year during the twenties, until people got bored with the story.

What did the SCS mean?

My eyes returned to the map. The first murder. Sutton Road was out of place.

Locking up the office, I returned to my hover. The sheriff still snoozed. Dumping her into the bed, I strapped her in before I summoned a map from the hover's masterputer. Sutton Road was easy to reach.

I cruised the road's nine klicks slowly, soaking in the atmosphere of its thirty-some-odd homes, mostly trailers on small, weedy lots. The hilly terrain made profitable farming unlikely. Folks shoveled gravel and clay from wheelbarrows into the ruts and potholes on their road, trading the county manual labor for the taxes they owed.

Lots of kids. Hovercraft were rare enough in these parts to draw them to the roadside to watch its whining engines, its cloud of dust. The healthy kids waved as if the circus was in town. I waved back. The first

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clues your turf was SCS territory was sterility, stillbirths, and birth defects. This turf was clean.

So how had the victim caught SCS?

Picking a house arbitrarily, I pulled into its dirt drive. I exited with my buyer's smile and practiced charm. The owner was a middle-aged poster boy for white trash. His T-shirt hadn't been changed in weeks.

"Howdy, I'm Roger Lansing. Would you mind if I park here for a day?" I grinned.

"If you don't get your tank off my property—"

I had been maced before. Can't say it was something a person grew accustomed to. Fled to my hover, getting the hatch closed a few seconds before another macing. By the time I rinsed my eyes and could see clearly, the yutz was taking potshots at my ride. One nice thing about cruising in a thirty-ton vehicle spawned from military technology was its rhino hull's resistance to bullets.

Drove a couple of klicks before trying my luck again. This time, I exited with my smile and a quart of strawberry preserves I had purchased from one of my customers in North Carolina.

A wizened ancient hobbled from her trailer. "You from the gubermint?"

"I'm Roger, just a simple traveling man. Here, would you like some of my wife's homemade preserves?"

"I ain't buying nuttin'."

"I'm not selling. I just need a place to park for a day or two."

She snatched the jar from my hands. The crone was not happy with me, but I persuaded her with a little currency. She stared at the stack of ten dollar Reagan coins I placed in her palm as if she had never seen one.

"Is that real gold?"

"No, ma'am, but it is real money."

I returned to my hovercraft, shutting down the engines, parking the reactor in low mode. Made certain the external cameras operated before I placed them in record mode. If we were attacked, I wanted a record for the police.

Opening my safe, I withdrew a pair of 5mm Deng semi-automatics. Donning their petite ankle holsters, I invested time cleaning the weapons.

The sheriff joined me as I boiled pasta. "Where the hell are we? Are you stupid enough to kidnap me?"

"Naw, I had a brainstorm. Our killer—"

"Our?"

"The killer wants organs. Everybody knows a 'ghoul' keeps a stash of organs. So, I drove us to the area of the first killing. Have you noticed how out of place from the other killings it is? I'll bet the murderer lives here. And when he, she, or it finds out an organ buyer is parked here—"

"You can't be bait!"

"It's not a me thing, it's an us thing."

"Is that coffee I smell?" she asked after a long silence.

"It's not a bad plan," I said as I poured her a cup. "Give it a few hours, maybe overnight. Do you have a better idea?"

We ate. Made small talk. I could see her internal debate play across her

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face as she failed to come up with a better plan. Made another pot of pasta. The sheriff was bottomless.

Shortly after dark, someone knocked on my hatch. The sheriff ducked into the bathroom, her weapon drawn. I made certain there were pictures of my visitor before I opened the hatch. He was a beanpole with a clean white shirt and tie, poorly matched with a pair of ragged jeans.

"My Brittney needs an operation," he said by way of a greeting.

"I'm not a doctor." I wondered if Brittney had SCS.

"Doctors won't see her unless I have money."

"Maybe I can help you there."

I locked the hatch after he entered. Had to clean my analyzer before I could run a skin sample from his forearm. My machines found him fairly healthy, save for a minor thyroid problem.

It was a routine transaction. He thumbed and signed a series of contracts on my handheld computer. After my medical drone warmed up, my drones "nailed" (as we said in the biz) a kidney, lung, a snippet of liver, and filtered out a bevy of enzymes and hormones from his bloodstream; he got seven mint-fresh ten thousand dollar bills. I could have talked him down to forty-five grand, but he kept crying.

After issuing him the standard placebo painkillers and real antibiotics, we chatted over a glass of orange juice. He came from the east end of the county, a fifth-generation farmer whose spread reached within half a klick of an old landfill. He was a second cousin to the third victim. I presented him with a jar of preserves before he left. Cringed as he started crying again while thanking me profusely.

The sheriff emerged after the donor left. She didn't say a word while I transferred my bounty from the cooling baths into cryogenic storage.

"Surprises you, doesn't it?" I asked as the organ slid into the storage vat. "You probably have that cartoonish ghoul image of my trade. My 'victims' *always* thank me."

She stared at me.

"Not saying there aren't ghouls in the business. Those bastards who park outside of casinos to rip lungs out of desperate gamblers . . . those are true ghouls. Me, I like to think the money means something to my donors." I went to the analyzer, smacking a key to get hardcopy which I showed to the sheriff. "Notice I do a complete drug and alcohol screen. A real ghoul would fake those for the record."

"You are . . . professional." Her pause made me think she was thinking something else. "At least," she continued, "you aren't wasting *your* time."

"What if I—"

"What if you hack out one of my lungs, so I can get the money to investigate this correctly?"

"Sheriff Carr, can you really afford to be out of action right now? Mister Jamison isn't going to get out of bed tomorrow or probably next week. My machines are good, but this is major surgery. Despite the low initial impact, a donor's body figures out there are organs missing."

She stared at her hands as they trembled.

"C'mon, what if I fix supper?"

I dethawed some venison stew, chopped an extra onion, added jala-

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peños for punch. Making iced tea, I added sugar until there was a centimeter on the bottom of the pitcher. She ate as if it was her first meal of the day. Getting her involved in a discussion of the morons in Washington and their latest "cure" for the depression revived her.

"Make political assassination legal. You ruin one person's life and you go to prison. These spineless puppets allowed the corporations to pull their strings until the collapse. What is a just penalty for ruining a hundred million lives?"

I chuckled. "Quite the radical. I—"

Came the rapping on the hatch. I hit the intercom, telling my guest to wait a minute. Stuffed the remains of the sheriff's meal into the oven, along with her glass. She dashed into the bathroom.

A hull camera showed a slight man wearing a ten-gallon hat and silver-toed boots. He leaned against a polished cane. I grinned.

"Only forty years out of fashion."

I opened the hatch. "May I help you?"

He was even shorter than his screen image. "I heard Callahan down the pike took some shots at you this afternoon. These days, people are afraid of everything. Can I come in?"

"Certainly, Citizen—"

"Fred Dejal. I live over the ridge from Callahan. That fool has caused me nothing but grief. It isn't right to treat strangers like that. Before the trash took over, people used to believe in hospitality. I just want you to know we aren't all ignorant stump-jumpers."

"Mighty nice of you."

He finally entered. I noticed that he took the steps easily. So, I reasoned, he didn't need the cane. It was merely an affectation tapping across my floor.

"So how long have you been in Mingo County?" he asked, doffing his hat with the flourish of a nineteenth century gentleman.

Harmless, I decided. Just another donor working up his courage.

I walked to the midsection of the hover, pointing him to the bench and table. "Just today. To be honest, I got lost. Didn't know I was in West Virginia until I stopped at that diner by the crossroads. I was just finishing supper. Care for some venison stew?"

"No, thank you. Mind if I ask what you are doing here?"

"Like some iced tea?"

"Don't mind if I do." He dropped his hat on the table, eyeing my bowl, then the back of my hover. Slowly, he eased down, perching on the lip of the bench.

As I poured, I said, "I was rousted by the sheriff at the diner. She thought I was some kind of serial killer. After my alibi checked out, I asked the witch for directions back to Kentucky. You see, my navigation gear broke. She got me good and lost. When I realized how lost I was, I decided the smart thing to do was stop for a while and fix my navigation system."

"Such a fancy vehicle. So modern. Hard to think anything breaks on it."

"She's a good ride, but I've been procrastinating about the overhaul she needs. You wouldn't believe how expensive a hovercraft is to maintain."

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"I thought you organ buyers were all millionaires."

"That's the common myth. I'm mortgaged to the hilt. Last year, I doubt if I cleared more than twenty grand." I neglected to explain how I spent six months of it in the hospital having my diseased lungs replaced.

Citizen Dejal stared into his glass. I could almost hear his mental gears grinding as he worked up his courage to ask: "Uh, how much are you, uh, paying for a kidney?"

Instead, he said, "Must get a lot of takers for all that organ money. Doubt if there are ten people in the whole county who made twenty grand last year."

"Sometimes you have to do radical things to survive the hard times."

"That's the truth."

I swallowed my impatience. A good buyer was as patient as a fisherman. Sooner or later, the donor would nibble the hook. I had endured a thousand such conversations as folks screwed up their courage to sell a part of themselves.

"Care for some more tea?"

"Don't mind if I do."

I hoisted the pitcher. Whereupon the man brought his cane down across my head. I crashed in a cascade of tea. Hit the deck hard. Threw up my right arm to ward off the next blow. And promptly went deaf.

A pistol going off in a confined space was beyond loud. One going off four times in rapid succession was beyond deafening. Citizen Dejal plopped onto the bench, slumping over the table as if melting.

Dazed, I sat in a puddle of tea. Sheriff Carr stepped on my hand. After she checked the deceased killer, she turned to me. It took a minute for me to realize she was yelling at me. Eventually, the words penetrated my ringing ears.

"You okay, Lansing?"

"I told you it was a good plan!"

As soon as my skull stopped echoing, I had my MD-XIX drone check for a concussion. Fortunately, a buyer developed a thick skull. I drove back to the cop shop. By then, the sheriff had cleaned up the worst of the mess. She raced inside her office, returning with a body bag. Took a few photographs of the scene, once we staged the killer's corpse in its original position. We dragged the body into the station where she tossed the corpse in a corner and sat me in a chair. Using a primitive video array, she recorded my testimony.

"You can leave now."

"What?" I asked.

"The case is closed. I'll go to Dejal's trailer later for the evidence I need."

"It occurs to me that he might have been naught but someone who hates ghouls. There's a bumper crop of haters."

The sheriff stopped scrawling on the tape's label. Her brow furrowed so deeply, it looked like her eyebrows were multiplying. "He tried to kill you, old man."

"You'd be surprised how many people do."

"Doesn't surprise me in the least," she replied through clenched teeth.

I squirmed in the unforgiving chair. "But maybe—"

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"Maybe nothing. He was killing you to steal your organs. That's what my report will say. So help me God, you had better say the same thing." She opened the killer's wallet, removing its few bills. "At least I have gas money."

"But maybe—"

"I am declaring this case solved. I will go to Dejal's trailer and find all the evidence I need to close this case. I *will* find the evidence."

I knew that tone. The fix was in. Maybe he *was* the killer. Maybe he was simply one of those nuts who thought I was kidnapping children to part them out. Maybe he was simply going to rob my cash stash. Regardless, I had no doubt that my visitor had wanted to kill me.

I owed the sheriff my life.

"I have your number. Should I need you, Citizen Lansing, I will call." She glared at me. "Don't worry, I'll give you credit for your little trap."

"No credit necessary. You did the heavy lifting. I was just along for the ride."

"You did good, Citizen Lansing."

"Glad it worked out," I said as I sidled from the room.

The moon was high in the sky. Found Polaris, kept its location in mind once I got into my hover. Summoning a map from the computer, I plotted the quickest route to Kentucky. I didn't stop until I plowed through a stand of wannabe Christmas trees to cross the river.

I stopped in the ruins of an old strip mine surrounded by a forest of weathered trunks, tombstones of trees killed by the acid run-off of coal mines. Shut down. Locked up. Popped open a vintage Burgundy after a long shower. Watched a little TV before I drifted off to a sound night's sleep.

The next afternoon, I culled the news services to find a nine-line story about Sheriff Carr killing a serial killer. The county was throwing her a party.

Before hitting the road, it took hours to remove the bloodstains from my dining area.

"Yeah, *that* would thrill a prospective donor, wouldn't it?"

The cleaning led me to the drones. I found the memory crystal containing the data from the sheriff's sample. She had SCS.

"I'll call Carr in a couple of weeks. No need to rain on her parade."

With that, I drove into the hills to nail a few more organs. ○

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BRIGHT RED STAR

Bud Sparhawk

Bud Sparhawk sails out of Annapolis and works in Washington, DC. He's had sporadic appearances in *Analog*, other magazines, and a few anthologies, and has several unsold novels on the shelf. This tale of an interplanetary war with an unknowable alien force is his first story for *Asimov's*.

Our boat floated silent as owls' wings and settled softly as an autumn snowflake. There was no doubt that the enemy had spotted us—the stealth could only minimize signs of our presence. We'd done everything we could to reduce detectability: hardened plastics, ceramics, charged ice, and hardly any metal. All that did was create doubt, and, possibly, delay. Or so we hoped.

We tumbled quickly from the boat as grounding automatically discharged the ship charge, without which the boat's ice frame would quickly melt. In a matter of minutes, the only remaining trace of our craft would be a puddle of impure water and the gossamer-thin spider-web of the stealth shield—and that would dissipate at the first hint of a breeze.

We deployed in pincer and arrowhead formation, sending two troops to the north to parallel our advance, two likewise to the south, and two to the point. Hunter and I followed in column.

We moved quickly, carefully, ever wary. That the Shardies would eventually find us was not in doubt, neither was the certainty of our death when they did so. They did not use humans well; however, I doubted they'd find much use for us.

Tactical estimates gave us an hour to save the recalcitrant settlers' souls. They were some sort of colony—religious or otherwise, it made no difference—only that they had foolishly chosen to remain where others fled.

There was a slight probability we'd have less than an hour and an even smaller possibility of having more, so we moved quickly. I'd estimated

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twenty minutes to reach their position and ten to twenty to ensure we'd located everyone. That left us five minutes for action and ten as margin for contingencies.

I knew we'd fail if we used more than fifty-five minutes.

". . . shards," one of the last observers managed to croak out before Jeaux II fell silent. That word was the only description of the aliens we'd ever heard, so it stuck.

The Shardies had hit hard when we first made contact with their kind, which could hardly be called contact at all since they attacked first and without provocation. When our ships backed off, their ship followed, attacking again and again with unbelievable ferocity. When its missiles ran out, they tried to ram the thick plate of our exploratory ship. It smashed into tiny ceramic fragments on impact, leaving a cloud of glittering fragments that spun into emptiness, leaving no trace, no hint, of what had so provoked them.

After much debate over the wisdom of such an attempt, we again tried to contact them. The idea of another space-spanning civilization held too much promise to ignore. It took years before we found them, but find them we did.

That is, we assume that someone found them, for a fleet of their ships suddenly appeared near Jeaux II and attacked every sign of human presence: ships, orbiting stations, ground-based settlements—anything that wasn't of natural origin. The military tried to defend themselves while the civilian ships fled in every direction.

This was a strategic mistake. Since they'd backtracked one of our ships to Jeaux, that meant that they could—and probably would—follow every ship who escaped. Every destination system was now at risk.

Thanks to the brief warning, most of the settled systems managed to mobilize to meet the Shardies attack. The initial losses were great. We had to fall back from system after system, engaged in a running battle with something we do not understand.

We've tried to figure out why they attack with such ferocity, why there hasn't been an attempt at contact, and why they won't respond to our calls. We fail at every attempt to understand them.

Neither have we deduced anything of their technology from the damaged ships we've managed to recover. Hulls, engines, and controls appear to be nothing but dirty glass. We suspect this is the analog of our silicon-based technology, but can't be sure. Researchers have been working hard, I'm told, but I have yet to hear of anything useful come of it.

Nor can we figure out what sort of creatures we're fighting. That one word, that one utterance from a lone observer on Jeaux, was all we had to go on.

What we do know for certain is that either the Shardies will be destroyed, or we will be. Humanity has lost too much, too many, for compromise. It is clear that there can be no middle ground.

The trip to the site of the single communications burst was uneventful. We didn't expect to encounter resistance. The Shardies don't settle on the

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planets they take from us. No, they just wipe them clean of humanity and then move on. We knew there had to be Shardie gleaners surveying the planet, trying to find some fresh meat, or, what was worse, breeding stock. With a little luck, we had a slight advantage by knowing the group's location. Without luck, we'd find that the Shardies had beaten us to them.

The location was a hill, close by a half-destroyed farming complex whose tower leaned precariously toward the north. With luck, we'd find whoever made the call nearby. First place to check were the buildings, or what remained of them.

We went straight in. Better to find whatever sign we could quickly—time was running out. A sweep of the barn was negative, as were the remains of the silo, and the outbuildings. The house was a different matter. We found some opened jars, preserves mostly. The footprints we found outside were small—a child's, perhaps, or a small woman. The tracks led up the hill and into the woods.

I sent the outriders wide to cover while Hunter followed the tracks. Could be a trap, so I waited, senses alert for any indication of a problem.

Crack of a twig brought me to my feet. It was Hunter and a little girl. "Cave up there," with a head nod. "Three dead men—three, four days gone." That tied with the time we'd received the burst.

She was a tiny thing—about nine or ten, I'd say—bright eyes and scraggly red hair. Good teeth. Looked scared as hell. I could understand that—Hunter wasn't being very gentle as he dumped her at my feet.

"What's your name?" I stooped to bring my head to her level.

"You them aliens?" she asked all wide-eyed. "How come you talk like us?"

"We're combat soldiers," I answered. "We're humans, just like you, sweetheart. Now, come on; what's your name?"

"Becky," she finally spit out. "How come you're still here? Paw said everybody left."

"We came back to take care of you and the others," I answered truthfully. "We can't afford to let you fall into enemy hands."

"Paw and the Paston boys thought you'd come," she said.

"How did they die?"

Becky seemed fascinated by my sidearm. "They shot them after the Pastons used the mayday thing. I hid in the back where they couldn't find me. Are you going to punish them for doing that?"

That got my attention. Takes a real idiot to shoot the people who demonstrated good sense. I began to doubt that the Shardies would've gotten much use out of whatever mush these jerks used for brains. "Right, sweetheart, we'll punish them, but first you have to tell us where they are."

"Did you bring a ship to take us away?" Becky asked as she fingered the butt of my AC-43. "That was why Paw grabbed the mayday—to get us a rescue ship."

"We came to make sure the enemy doesn't get you," I answered honestly. "Listen, we don't have much time. Can you take us to where the others are hiding?"

"I think they're still over at the Truett place," she said, pointing to the east.

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I nodded to Hunter, who was already directing the scouts eastward. I picked up Becky and moved out. Hunter covered my rear. "Can you tell us how to get there?"

"You mean to the Truetts' place?" Becky asked. "Sure. There's a big field there. That where the rescue ship's going to land?"

The Shardie ships we'd managed to capture more or less intact were completely empty—no aliens at all—just glass of various colors and shapes. Either the ships were highly automated, or the Shardies had destroyed themselves completely so they would not fall into our hands. Suicidal, or so we thought. Eventually, we discovered some living creatures, if you can call them that, aboard one of their ships.

One of the things we'd learned was that if we had sufficient warning, we could defend ourselves fairly well. Sometimes we managed to drive them off, and sometimes not. Every battle was fought hard and long, usually with massive losses on both sides. Our defensive successes managed to achieve, at best, parity.

That all changed at Witca, a heavily fortified military outpost armed with the latest data on Shardie attack patterns. Only the Shardies were using new patterns that got through the outer defenses. It was as if they were anticipating the base's reactions and countering Witca's best defensive moves with ease. Witca fell with all hands lost.

After Witca's defeat, we lost ground steadily, falling further and further back toward Earth year after year. We no longer had parity. We were losing.

Then, largely through a stroke of luck, our fleet happened upon a lone Shardie ship near Outreach. As soon as it realized we were near, it attacked on an evasion pattern that defied the fleet's best defensive efforts. The fleet lost six ships before managing to still whatever mysterious force propelled the Shardie vessel.

The fleet marines lost no time in boarding. Command had high hopes of finally finding something alive inside. They weren't disappointed. *Disgusted* and *surprised* might better describe their reaction. Inside, they found sixteen of the Jeaux survivors.

Survivors isn't exactly the word. What they found were sixteen bodies without arms, legs, and most organs. What remained were essentially heads hooked up to life support and fueled by oxygenated glucose pumps. There were a couple of hundred strands of glass fiber running from the ship's walls into each skull, into each brain, into each soul. Four of the sixteen were still functioning—alive is not a word to describe their condition.

Clinical examination of the four revealed that each was fully conscious and aware, at least that's what the eeg traces indicated. They also indicated that the Shardies had used no painkillers to dull the senses when they'd done this. Had the survivors mouths, they would have been continually screaming. All four died mercifully fast when their pumps ran dry. I'm not too sure that the medics didn't help that along. It was a mercy.

The only conclusion we could draw was that the Shardies were using

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human brains to defeat human defenses. They were obviously using our own brains to "think" like us.

There was no hesitation on the part of Command. They ordered everyone, except combat types like us, from the most likely targets. Humanity couldn't allow any more people to become components for the Shardie offense.

But civilians never listen. Farmers were the worst, hanging onto their little plots and crops until somebody dragged them away, kicking and screaming at the injustice of it all. That's why we were here. Forty settlers had stupidly refused to be evacuated from New Mars. Forty we didn't know about until we got that one brief burst.

My mission was to make certain that they didn't become forty armless, legless, gutless, screamless weapon components.

"Why do you look so funny?" Becky asked as we jogged along. Her question was expected. Few civilians ever see combat troops like us. Luckily the combat gear and darkness hid most of the worst modifications I'd had to undergo: cybernetic heart-lung pump with reserve oxygen so I could operate in any atmosphere or even underwater; augmented muscles on legs and arms that bulked me up like a cartoon giant on steroids; amped vision that ran from the near infrared up toward the UV range—I could even switch to black and white for better night vision—and smart-metal skeleton structures to provide a good base for my massive muscles. Flesh had been stripped from anything exposed and replaced with impervious plas. My hands were electro-mechanical marvels capable of ripping weapons-grade plating off a spaceship, and sensitive enough to lift a tiny girl without harm.

Then there was my glucose pump, a nasty, but useful technology we'd copied from the Shardies. Even my brain had been altered—substituting silicon and gel for the mass of pink jelly I was born with. Definitely not something you'd want your daughter to date. I'm glad it was dark. In daylight, I'd probably scare the bejesus out of her.

"We're modified so we can fight the bastards," I growled. Revenge for relatives on Witca was my overt reason. Curiosity about the Shardies, and getting a piece of them, was secondary. I saw no sense going into the gory details or the agonizing processes involved with a little girl who wouldn't understand. "Tell me about the rest of your group. Are they all right?"

"Mr. Robbarts is still the boss. He's the one that shot Paw, I think. And there's Jake and Sally and little Billy. Billy's my friend. Jake's got a bad leg.

"Then there's all the Thomas women. They have a big wagon, or they did before the men came and burned it." She started crying.

I was certain she was talking about the roaming gangs. Lots of people didn't want to leave anything the Shardies might be able to use. Senseless, that. Shardies could care less, but most civilians wouldn't know that. Best destroy what you left behind, they'd probably thought, and had taken their anger out on things they could reach.

"Mr. Robbarts said we didn't have to worry because we weren't soldiers.

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He said we'd have the whole world to ourselves. But after everybody left, Paw got really afraid of what might happen."

Robbarts must be the leader of this group. "Robbarts was wrong, Becky. You all should have left," I said. "Didn't they tell you that it wouldn't matter if you were a soldier or not? Being human is all that matters."

"Mr. Robbarts got real mad when Paw argued with him and said he wanted to use the mayday thing. Then Paw and the boys and me ran away with it. You got to go along this stream for a bit now," she directed.

That explained the burst message that told us there were people left behind. They must have used one of the emergency broadcast units the evacuation team had scattered across New Mars in the last days, just in case. "What happened then?" I asked as I followed her pointing finger down the stream. The scouts picked up my changed direction and reacted.

"They told Paw to come out of the cave to talk," Becky continued, chatting away. "Paw told me to hide. Then I heard them arguing and shouting and I got really afraid. Then there was some shots. I heard the men looking around. Mr. Robbarts was cussing a lot and calling me all sorts of names, but I stayed where I was. I was scared."

"What did you do then?" I stepped around a huge boulder and wondered if it would be easier, and faster, to wade in the stream instead of through the woods on either side. Hunter was close by my side now in this narrow section.

"After it got quiet, I snuck out and found Paw and the boys laying on the ground. Paw was bleeding bad. I tried to stop it, but it wouldn't stop. Then he went to sleep and didn't move for a long time. I got hungry waiting for the rescue ship Paw said would come." That explained the jelly and jam jars—just what a little girl would like to eat. "Are you going to bury Paw and the boys?"

"Burial wastes time—something we can't afford," Hunter said sharply. *Down,* he signaled as a shot ricocheted off my chest armor.

I dropped immediately, instinctively tucking Becky underneath to protect her. Hunter slipped to the side and disappeared. I switched to infrared and made out fuzzy heat forms in the brush a dozen meters ahead. The muzzle of a rifle was glowing heat-bright from the shot he had taken. None of the forms moved.

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I waited. Silent. Becky groaned and wiggled feebly. "It really hurts," she said. Her voice was muffled.

"Wait," I whispered, waiting for Hunter to get into position.

"Let her up," a man's voice barked from behind me. "Move easy now. I got you covered."

I pushed up, allowing Becky to crawl out before I came to my feet. The man took a step back. "Huh, you sure are a big one." He peered closer. "Ugly, too."

"He's come to rescue us, Mister Robbarts." Becky said. "He's got another soldier with him." Becky's voice sounded strained. I glanced at her and saw the blood. Damn, had his shot hit her?

I noticed the heat signatures of two more men in the brush; one behind Robbarts and another somewhat further back. I had no doubt all were armed and all too ready to shoot. That made six in all.

"You shot Becky," I said calmly. "She needs help."

"The hell with her," Robbarts said nastily. "Her damn family's been nothing but trouble. Killed one of my boys, they did. Let the little bitch bleed."

"They're going to take us away in a ship," Becky said in a rush. "That's why we're going to your place. The field's a place they can land."

Robbarts didn't answer her directly. "That true, soldier? You got a ship?"

I really didn't like this man. "Nobody, nothing, could find a trace of the boat we came in. Becky's the one who said there'd be a rescue ship."

"Ain't no damn ship taking me or my people off our land," Robbarts spit, ignoring what I had said. "We're going to hold on to this place come whatever. This'll be a damn nice place for me and mine after the war moves on."

Did he really believe that? "The Shardies are going to comb this planet and glean whatever human stock they can find. Do you know what they do to the people they capture?"

Robbarts sneered. "I seen the news about what they did to them poor troopers. But we're civilians, not some combat-trained space jockey. They won't bother us. We don't know military stuff."

I couldn't believe Robbarts's ignorance. "The aliens don't care what you *know*. It's the human thought processes, the way our minds form associations, our ability to recognize patterns—that's what they use. They don't give a damn if a brain comes from a soldier, a navigator, or even some dumb-assed farmer!" As soon as the angry words popped out of my mouth I regretted them.

"Well, I might be a dumb-assed farmer, soldier boy," Robbarts drawled, "but it's you who's at the wrong end of this here gun."

"Not exactly," I said as I watched Hunter silently taking out the two forms behind Robbarts. That action told me the other three had already been neutralized. Hunter is good at what he does—thorough.

"You really shouldn't have said that about Becky," I said calmly. Robbarts' normal human reaction time was no match for my enhanced speed. I quickly swung the knife edge of my forearm sleeve, and a wet, red grin grew beneath his chin.

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Severing the cardioid arteries releases the pressure and drains blood from the brain. It causes death in seconds, and slashing his larynx prevented any outcry. Robbarts stood quietly erect for a moment until his body got the message that blood was no longer flowing to the head and no more signals were coming from the dying brain. Then he toppled over.

I scooped up Becky and continued. Hunter would destroy Robbarts's head, just as he had the others, and catch up. I hoped the rest of Robbarts's flock wouldn't waste more of what little time we had left.

While I jogged along, I checked to see where Becky had been hit. It wasn't fatal, so I put a compress over the wound to staunch the bleeding. It would do well enough until we found the others.

"Where now?" I asked.

Becky stopped sobbing for a moment. "There's a pond down there. It's up the hill from there. There's a hiding hole near the barn."

So that's how they managed to evade the evacuation search teams—by hiding in a bunker. Hunter had caught up by then and I briefed him. He directed the scouts to converge on the spot. "What if it's sealed?" he asked.

"You know what to do," I answered and he smiled. That was the difference between us—he enjoyed this, enjoyed the danger, enjoyed the blood. When we got within sight of the entrance to the bunker I put Becky down. "You have to call them out," I said. "Can you do that?"

"They'll shoot me like they did Paw," Becky protested. "I hurt real bad, mister. Can't you do something?" She was crying.

"Listen Becky, it's really important that I get to those people quickly. I tell you what; if they shoot at you, I'll punish them like I did Mr. Robbarts, all right?" She nodded, but reluctantly. "Becky, just walk over there and yell. Tell them you're hurt and need help. I don't think they'll shoot a little girl."

"Aren't you coming with me?" she said.

I shook my head. "No, they might be afraid if they saw me. You can tell them who we are if you want and then I'll show myself." I wiped her nose and pushed her behind to get her moving.

Becky hesitated and then slowly hobbled across the field. "Help! I been shot!" she screamed.

A black hole appeared in the ground by the barn and a man climbed out. "Becky?" he called out. "Robbarts said you were dead." I noticed he'd left the hatch open. Good.

"He just shot me, like he did Paw and the Pastons," she answered.

"We heard a shot but didn't know it was you," the man said as he approached and knelt before Becky. "Damn, that looks bad. How did you manage to get here—and where are Robbarts and his men?" He was looking around nervously.

"The rescue soldiers took care of him," Becky answered innocently.

"Soldiers!" That didn't sound like a curse. More like a man with hope in his voice. I stepped forward.

"Captain Savage; forty-fifth combat arm," I said. "We came to save your souls." I could see by his frightened reaction that he wasn't going to be a problem.

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"He's got a ship to take us all away, Mr. Truett, just like Paw said," Becky said. "They'll have a doctor to fix me up and we'll all be safe."

Truett stepped closer. "I heard things." I could hear the fear in his voice. How much he knew, I did not know.

"We can't be used by the Shardies," I said calmly. "Can't survive more than a few minutes without our combat rations." I figured he knew about the measured doses of anticoagulants fed into my bloodstream. When those stopped, my brain would suffuse with thick blood, hemorrhaging and destroying the remaining organic brain cells. "We're running out of time here."

"How long?" he said, showing more understanding than I expected from a dumb-assed farmer who hadn't had the good sense to save himself and his family when he could.

"I've only got about another hundred minutes," I answered.

Truett turned his head and whistled. "Suicide trooper." He blinked, but that didn't stop a tear from running down his cheek. He understood. Without another word he led the way toward the black hole. "They're all inside," he remarked quietly. "There's thirty of us. Mostly women. Some are just kids," he added sadly. "I was hoping. . . ." He stopped, looked at Becky, and sighed. "Never mind."

Thirty in the bunker. That meant that all forty were accounted for, counting the three men of Becky's family, the six Hunter had taken out, Becky, and Truett. Good. "We'll take care of them quickly." I said and he nodded. Quiet. Yeah, I guess he did know "things."

Hunter and the scouts had already converged on the hole and were dropping through, one after another. I had no doubts of their effectiveness.

"What's it like for you?" Truett said. He was holding Becky tightly in his arms.

"Being here, or being a soldier?" I answered.

"Both. I can't see how you can be so cold and distant. Hell, man, can't you at least show some emotion? Or are you mostly machine now?" His voice was a mixture of anger and fear.

"I grew up on a farm," I said slowly, trying to dredge up memories of a happier past on a planet now lost beyond redemption. "I still remember the smell of autumn, the feeling of mud between my toes, and how it felt to kill my prize sheep when it was time. This mission's no different. I do what I have to do because there are worse things for a human being than dying."

"I saw the news tapes," he said. "Ugly. Horrible. But what about your own hide? Don't you have any sense of self-preservation?"

"When you've been taken care of, we'll go after the Shardies," I bit out. "Our secondary mission is to gather whatever data we can and squirt a message to the fleet. After that, well, there's four, five thousand tons of explosive force in our packs." I patted the small canister strapped to my back. "I figure a dead-man switch will take care of them if we get close."

Truett smiled. "Brave, but it was a foolish waste of resources to come back for us. We made our own mess—stupid as it was to believe Robbarts—and we deserve to lie in it."

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I checked the time. We only had fifteen minutes of good time left. Hunter was taking far too long.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly. "You don't have any time left."

Truett grabbed my hand and squeezed. "I just want you to know . . ." he began and then choked off whatever he was going to say. Instead he slapped my shoulder. "Yeah." I could tell he was trying hard not to cry, but his voice cracked at the end. "Well," he said to Becky. "Looks like we've got a ship to catch," he said cheerily.

Hunter popped out of the hole and came toward me at a run. "We're done," he said quickly. Moments later, the ground surged upward with a roar as smoke and flame shot from the burrow's entrance. If that didn't get the Shardies' attention, nothing would.

"Becky," I said, and gently took her from Truett's arms. "It's time to go."

"Is the ship coming?" Becky asked excitedly as she squirmed around in my arms. "I don't see it."

"It's up there in the sky," Truett said very gently. "Just look up. There, to the right of that big, bright red star." Becky tilted her head back to look almost directly overhead.

I brought my forearm across her throat and held her as she died. I hoped that she didn't have enough time to realize what I had done. What I had to do.

Hunter had taken care of Truett without a struggle. He too had been looking up, as if he might have believed his own words.

I gently laid Becky's lifeless body on the ground, trying not to feel. As before, I let Hunter take care of the final details, ensuring not a single brain cell remained in either head.

There were two minutes left in our window when I heard a distant whine. It could only be the Shardies. I placed my finger on the detonator. Our comm packages were running and would catch our final moments.

"Civilians just don't understand, do they?" Hunter asked as he waited beside me for sweet oblivion, sweet release from these mechanical contrivances we'd become.

I thought of Truett, and the way he had bravely shielded Becky to the last, thought of all the ways the war hasn't changed human decency, thought of my prize sheep and the necessities life forces on us.

"Some do," I admitted. O

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GREEN SHIFT

Mary Rosenblum

Mary Rosenblum, a Clarion West graduate and past Hugo nominee, writes SF, mystery, and stories that fall into assorted other genres in her rural home in Oregon. She has published novels in both SF and mystery (as Mary Freeman), more than fifty short stories to date, and when she is not writing, she trains and tracks with large dogs. Ms. Rosenblum is at work on her next SF novel, *Eternity Shift.* The book shares the same intriguing universe as her latest tale for us.

She was closing on her brother's killer. Ahni Huang shut her eyes, burying the raw wound of her grief as the shuttle from the Elevator matched spin with the main port of New York Up. Emotion could distract her. Get her killed. The chairs swiveled as her limbs grew heavier, giving her a vivid moment of nausea before *up* and *down* settled into place. Didn't help that down had been up a moment ago. She drew a slow breath, dropping briefly into Pause until her heartbeat slowed and her biochemistry stabilized. You could control mammalian stress reactions, but you couldn't entirely banish them.

Like grief.

Please remain seated until docking is completed, the cool androgynous voice murmured.

All through the cylindrical cabin, seat-webs clicked and retracted, and the clone-similar business passengers, plus a couple of overdressed tourists, smoothed wrinkles from their singlesuits and pulled bags from the storage bins beneath their seats. One more time, Ahni scanned the faces, senses heightened to alert now, watching for the telltale slide of an eye, the subtle edge in body language that would mark a hit or a tail. They would expect her father, but they would be looking for any member of the Huang Family. Two natives on board. She noted the slender, almost fragile build that gave them away. She watched them covertly as she pretended to fiddle with her bag.

Anticipation, resignation, fatigue, boredom . . . as a class 2 empath, and a sensitive one, she was sure they weren't acting.

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So far, so good. Ahni levered herself from the padded acceleration recliner, her stomach happy with the 80 percent Earthnormal gravity. She stretched, aware of the muscles cording on her small, lithe frame, wanting to go out and run for about six miles to work out the kinks of the Elevator trip and shuttle flight. They had a jogging path here in New York Up, but it required a Level Three tourist pass, and she wasn't staying in that kind of hotel.

She slung her slightly scuffed business brief over her shoulder, looking like your basic mid-level Assist running the boss's errands from the planetside business headquarters. She adjusted her body language to reflect mild boredom tinted with a bit of apprehension—things weren't going well downside, but her job wasn't on the line—just her retirement plan—and slipped between a man with a polished gym physique and genened tan and a lanky woman with natural Mediterranean genes—probably Turkey or Crete, Ahni guessed—and a taut, driven face. Still on full alert, Ahni shuffled down the narrow aisle and out into Customs and Immigration.

It wasn't much more than a wide corridor with a desk and gate barring it a dozen meters from the docking lock. Just enough space for all the bodies to cram into. No uniforms, no stun guns, but Ahni's skin crawled with the knowledge that a half-dozen beams and fields were probing every square centimeter of her skin and body cavities. Up ahead, a man jolted to a halt, a look of surprise on his face that transitioned through annoyance to resignation. His com link, an earring that looked like a natural diamond, had just informed him that security wanted to talk to him. With a small shrug, he turned and headed toward a panel that had slid silently open in the wall. A couple of people looked at him curiously. Ahni shrugged. He was innocent of anything, or thought he was. But his face registered him clearly as Han, and the China Families were currently squabbling with New York Up over tariffs. He should have landed on Dragon Wheel, the Chinese orbital. The Han with the big diamond wasn't going to get where he was going—at least not on time.

The man in front of her passed through the gate. Ahni stepped forward at the agent's nod, keeping her bored/apprehensive body language carefully in place, and adding a mental layer of worry about the LaGuardia account and the discrepancies in the inventory database, couldn't wait to get this mess untangled and get back to terra firma. . . . Empaths made good money working for Security.

She stood on the painted footprints so that the security scanner could check all her vitals against her ID chip. They'd match. The ID chip she had paid so much for was top quality.

"Haarevort, Jessica, from the Free State of Singapore, Pan Malaysia Compact, on business with East Asia Biologicals, three day visa," the cold-faced woman intoned, her eyes on the screen in front of her. "Custom declaration?"

"Nothing." Ahni gave her the absent-minded and impatient smile of the "small Family" member, the seasoned businesswoman running minor Singapore Family errands that the database assured the Immigration agent that she was. She held the brief to the scanner, and it chimed

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agreement that the luggage seal had been placed at the Palembang elevator station and hadn't been tampered with.

That had cost nearly as much as her Pass chip.

The agent looked up to nod her through, the hint of a flaccid sag to her muscles suggesting that she lived high up toward the axle of the orbital, not down here in the high-G outer layers of the rotating can that was NYUp. For a second, her eyes flickered as she focused on Ahni's face, and a small flare of indecision made her hesitate.

Ahni's face was not Dutch Indonesian at all, but rather showed an unselected mix of Taiwan aboriginal, Chinese, and Polynesian genes in the planes of her face and tint of her skin. When she wore her hair long, it had a reddish cast in the sun, and a faint wave to the thick, unruly mass.

The woman gave the slightest of shrugs and waved her through, although her indecision still tainted the air like a whiff of perspiration. Too bad. Ahni put tired unconcern into her posture as she hoisted her bag to her shoulder. If someone asked, this woman might remember her. Not good.

She was here to kill.

Still in business mode, Ahni followed the stream of passengers through the last meters of Immigration and out into the Arrival Hall. She closed her eyes, murmuring her access code to her implanted link. The screen lining her eyelids glowed to life, offering her a glowing map of the corridors opening into the Arrival Hall. The route to her Level Four hotel room glowed a neon blue, the others green. Fourth Level—close enough to the outer skin to have a comfortable gravity, far enough in to fit with her errand-runner persona. She impressed the route into short-term memory and headed toward the elevator. Out here, near Arrival, where all the tourist and business traffic came and went, the corridors were spacious, lined with shops offering trinkets—fragile crystals grown in microG, asteroid fragments set in precious metals, food, euphorics, and VR entertainment. Tourists in a wide array of singlesuit fabrics and geneselect or natural faces strolled along, their mild curiosity like a whiff of incense in the air. The seasoned business travelers hurried somewhere, fatigue and adrenaline a faint sourness to her senses. The thin-looking natives all wore service uniforms up here at this level. They weren't curious, nor were they particularly friendly. As she passed a lounge with a vast window offering the stars and a huge blue green slice of Mother Earth, she halted in spite of herself.

She had never before been off-planet. But this was where the trail had led.

Turning against the endless black of space and the stardust glints of distant suns, the great blue sphere held her eyes. Xai had wanted the Huang Family to invest in the orbitals. He had chafed under their father's control. For an instant, Ahni's vision blurred with an image of the steep sandy beaches of the family enclave, north of Taipei. Abandoned mines had soiled the water in the Old Days. The family had cleaned that up, regenerated the ocean species that had disappeared. She and her brother Xai had played together in the clean water, finding new creatures to examine, crabs with gossamer claws, tiny squirting shell-things that closed together. Their treasures, shared only between them. But they had

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never been enough for him. He had always wanted more. She closed her eyes briefly, the stone of her grief buried beneath the heavier stone of vengeance in her heart. Death merited Death, a law older than the Han, older even than Taiwan.

Enough. She smirked for Security's everywhere eyes, shrugged, and turned away, the seasoned business traveler for a moment beguiled by what might have been real, but was merely a digital image on a wall screen faked to look like a window. Not taking it seriously.

A slip. Grief was a stone to carry, slowing you down. Adrenaline boosted her senses to painful heights as she left the lounge and crossed the crowded strolling spaces to the elevator, aware of every jostling shoulder and oncoming face. In the elevator, the numbers increased. That's right. Axle was *up,* skin was *down.* The floor pushed against her feet, but when the large car paused, she exited slowly, feeling as if she was walking on a trampoline. The other riders scattered from the lobby, vanishing down corridors, intent, busy, not looking.

A tall, skinny man in a blue singlesuit, a geneselected Masai type, hesitated, frowning slightly at a personal reader, concentrating on something slightly irritating.

A tiny shard of intent pricked through that concentration static, and Ahni reacted without thought, flinging herself down and toward his feet, shoulders curling to roll. Displaced air feather-brushed her cheek as a dart skimmed past, then her roll caught him at the knees, out-of-control and sloppy in the lessened gravity. He flew over her back, his screen sailing to clatter against the elevator door, twisting to use the momentum of his fall. But her sloppiness caused him to overreact and his head hit the wall with a dull sound. Ahni tried to continue her roll. Different physics here! She slammed sideways against the wall, tasting adrenaline and blood, struggling to get her breath.

Nice setup.

No place to hide an unconscious body in these sterile residential corridors. She rolled him against the wall, tugged her singlesuit straight, and strode briskly out into the corridor, her body language focused, intent on that hotel room and a meal, senses straining. Eyes flicked past her in the hallway, not looking, not seeing, bodies brushed by. If someone had found him, they didn't start screaming. Maybe orbitals didn't yell much. She blinked, recording the man's face and polished scalp into short term memory. He wasn't native, was a Select. Which meant he'd have a thousand look-alikes. At least. Time to disappear before Security got into the act.

She had been lucky. He could have darted her with any of a half dozen toxins that would make her seem to faint, could have stepped in to help. But he had hesitated . . . she had lucked out. Ahni ran her fingertips over her shoulder as the eyes skimmed her unseeing, finding the slickness of the tiny pseudoskin patch, peeling it off with a sharp fingernail under the pretense of scratching a small itch. A trace of blood made her fingertips slippery as she squeezed the purchased chip from its shallow bed. More natives at this level, fewer tourists and business travelers. A large woman danced past her, humming to music playing in her head, naked

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from the waist up, a silver filigree of inlaid fiberlight decorating her dark breasts and hairless scalp. The naked breasts startled Ahni in spite of her knowledge of the orbital customs.

Doors here looked like residences, decorated with holos or flat graphics. Not many uniforms or business suits. She turned down a connecting corridor, putting casual purpose into her posture and stride, her bag swinging done-for-the-day casual over her shoulder, dropping momentarily into Pause to suppress the flood of corticosteroids into her bloodstream. Without breaking stride, Ahni pressed the pseudoskin patch to a residential doorway, decorated with a holographic pot of flowers. If Security looked for Haarevort she would be loitering in this doorway. Ahni paused, closing her eyes to summon the map of New York Up from short-term. She needed safety, time to drop into full Pause, access her personal netspace, and figure out how things had gone so wrong so fast. And how to fix it. An ancient fairy tale sprang to mind, about a Muslim rabbit and an Israeli fox. About a thorn patch . . . The corridor walls curved into floor and ceiling, covered with a fine-fibered carpeting, tinted a soft, soothing green. She had passed the last of the hotel rooms. Not so many people down here. When she reached the next service bay, she slowed until the preoccupied woman in the neon green singlesuit and natural euro-mix face disappeared into a room. Then Ahni whisked into the bay and palmed the control plate next to the service elevator. It only took a handful of seconds for the network in her palm to analyze and override the lock. The door slid open and she stepped in. They'd expect her to go down to the rim, to the safety of gravity and Security. She overrode the controls, sent the car up. Past the cheap residential levels, past the manufacturing and storage levels, clear to the axle. The end of the line.

She'd never spent time in microG before. Rabbit in the thorn patch. Krator clan was an Earthside clan, just like the Huang clan. They had hired local talent.

So why NYUp, where Krator had as little presence as Huang? Not even Pause had yielded an answer, but this is where the assassin's trail had led her. Her grief threatened once more to erupt and she willed it down. I will avenge you, she promised her brother's spirit as the elevator slowed and beeped at her. *Secure for Minimal G.* The letters ran silver and gold across the wall in multiple languages, chasing themselves around and around the tubular walls. Not that she needed them, she was barely anchored to the floor by a shadow of *down.* Her stomach stirred, protesting, as she slipped into a set of the harness-like padded straps that lined the wall.

Movement resumed. The straps cut into her shoulders slightly, not enough to be painful. Then . . . the downward tug lessened, and she was floating. Held by the straps.

So far so good. Ahni slipped out of the straps, floating. She swallowed, groping for *up* and *down*, but the featureless tube of the elevator offered her no orientation. The doors didn't open and the annoyed blip of a beep told her that she was neglecting something . . . probably a password. Her palm tingled just above the threshold of feeling as her embedded hardware dealt with the control plate. The door slid open . . .

. . . and she gasped.

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GREEN LIGHT

She recoiled, a knee-jerk primate reaction, uncontrollable. She started to tumble, stomach knotting, grabbed wildly for the door frame, missed, tumbled on out into the blinding glare, floundering, helpless. *Up. Down!* She squinted, trying to make out a blur of shapes, struggling for orientation as the world seemed to wheel around her, nausea threatening. The air tasted thick, damp, rich with . . . smells. She couldn't identify them. Soft green things brushed her as her tumbling slowed. Leaves? Hyroponics at the axis. The fact popped in from short-term memory and the soft brush became recognizable suddenly, but *up* and *down* still refused to fall into place. Bad choice of thorn patch! She laughed, a single sharp note, forcing her burning eyes open, struggling to bring the green glare into some kind of orienting focus. Goggles. You had to use something down here. Would it blind her? She used Pause to quell a spurt of fear adrenaline. She grabbed, feeling soft plant things crush beneath her hands, tear free, grabbed again. And stopped her tumbling finally. Behind her, the elevator beeped and the door whispered closed. Somebody wanted it.

So much for the thorn patch.

Still clutching handfuls of moist bruised leaves, Ahni stretched out a cautious foot, damping her reaction to the movement. Felt something thick and fairly solid beneath her foot. A large column? Behind her, she heard a silvery chime and caught a flicker of movement off at the edge of vision.

The elevator.

Before her conscious mind could catch up, she planted both feet against the leaf-covered column, knees bent. Her thigh muscles, thick from workout, bunched, and she shot forward, blind to all intents and purposes, arms shielding head and face, praying to all her ancestors that whoever had come down in the elevator would miss.

She felt him, intent and at ease. At home and not hurrying, sure of himself.

Her shoulder slammed hard into something that gave some, sent her tumbling again, cartwheeling like a kid's pinwheel or a kite spiraling down. She curled into a fetal ball, head down, rebounded from another column, grabbed, felt stems tear, juice from crushed green things making her hands slippery. One foot landed squarely on something and she pushed again, hard, just *go!* Blind, she rocketed forward again.

Felt something tiny sting her shoulder.

Felt his triumph.

Damn.

Vision faded and her body no longer worked. Paralysis? Or death? Her face hit something thin and whippy, then something harder, felt her face bruise, couldn't do anything. She was losing momentum and the light was fading. Dreamily, she remembered fishing with her great grandfather in the South China Sea, clean and sparkling, full of sharks and fish.

Only when your hook is solid do you take them, he had said. *Never too soon.*

The fisherman in the elevator had hooked her solid. Never too soon.

Ahni tried to close her burning eyes as her body slowed and began to drift. Couldn't do it.

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An apparition appeared in front of her. Narrow face, like a hairless skull drawn into caricature by some art program. Weird milky eyes with no pupil, limbs too long for their thin boniness, and they . . . bent. Like green bamboo. I am dying, Ahni thought.

The strange ,thin creature with the blind eyes grinned at her, grabbed her wrist. She felt that . . . and experienced a moment of surprise, then more nausea as the apparition yanked at her and *green* and *light* fled by her and she thought for one confused instant, *why am I not drowning?* then remembered that she was not in the China Sea, but way up above the clouds.

"Why?" The voice penetrated a sea filled with half-seen sharks, swarming with movement and unseen fears. Anger rumbled like thunder at the edge of her consciousness, pierced by a steel flicker of . . . fear.

"What were you *thinking* of? Koi, you know better."

"He was going to kill her. She's pretty. And she couldn't get around any better than a new baby. Why did he want to kill her? It . . . wasn't fair. She couldn't get away."

Different voice, high and thin like a child's, but . . . she didn't feel a child's butterfly presence, but rather a clear stillness, like a pool of water.

"Damn." The anger rumble peaked, that metallic flicker of fear like a razor-edged blade. "Now what?"

Someone else's fear got you dead, all too often. Dropping briefly into Pause, Ahni tested muscle groups, was rewarded by a whisper of response. Play dead . . . or maybe get dead.

"I can take her back, Dane. Before she wakes up. You said nobody believes about us. And she's not from up here anyway. Look at all those muscles! She's from *down there.*"

"Too late. She's listening to us."

Uh-oh. Another empath. Change tactics. With a mental shrug, Ahni opened her eyes and gasped, not needing to pretend confusion. Her eyes burned like fire.

"You'll be all right," the rich, rumbling voice said. "In the short term, the light won't damage your eyes."

She blinked, a major effort, struggling to sort out a kaleidoscope of images, green light, and shadow.

Plants, her brain told her. But they were too big, not like this. . . . She had walked in the jungle preserves of Indonesia and the Amazon, and that was what first came to mind. Jungle. She was floating amidst a forest of vines as thick as her leg, furred with leaves and tendrils of a dozen different shapes and styles. Pea. She recognized the tendrils suddenly, starred with white blossoms and the small scimitar shapes of forming pods. Nearby, she made out a tangle of bean vines, Chinese long beans, their skinny pods more than a meter in length.

The images began to parse. The thick tangle of leaves . . . pea, bean, tomato, she recognized, eggplant, their furry leaves sheltering long, skinny thrusts of shiny purple-black fruit, and peppers, green, orange, and yellow—all too large, and slightly strange. The light, turned thick and green by the dense tapestry of leaves, was tolerable. The plants seemed

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to be growing on thick columns that vanished into a blur of green above and below.

"Who are you and how did you get down here? This level is restricted."

She twisted toward the source of the rumble-voice, tensed as the movement threatened to start her spinning. A hand caught her, damped the motion, and she found herself staring into the weird milky eyes and long face that she had seen as the dart hit her. Cataracts? From the light? Not a child, but child-sized, naked except for an intricately wrapped band of fabric that might have been someone's singlesuit once. He had no body hair she noticed, and he clung to one of the thick leafy vines with long prehensile toes. He was the source of that pool-clear curiosity. And not human. She stifled her reaction, her gut icy, looking death in the eyes. They couldn't afford to let her leave. The creature was pleased and excited, like the puppy she'd had as a kid. If he'd had a tail, he'd be wagging it.

"Meet Koi," the voice said, tinged with a bitter amusement now. "You're wrong about him. And you owe him."

He was reading her very accurately. Ahni tore her eyes away from the grinning kid-thing—Koi? Like the golden fish in her mother's courtyard pool?—turned her burning eyes toward the rumble-voice. Not old, not young, in that middle balance. Ropy muscles and thin limbs of a native—someone who spent minimal required time in a gravity gym. A natural, he expressed a wild mix of genes, European, a bit of North Africa, maybe some Amerind, she guessed. He wore the green and silver NYUp singlesuit, same one the officials in the Arrival Hall had worn, but his eyes were hidden by dark goggles. She couldn't read him at all. Which made him a Class One empath. And there weren't any Class Ones employed in NYUp. She had checked.

She dropped fully into Pause, accessing her database, scanning through it in the space of a breath, for a match to the face in front of her.

Dane Nilsson. Hydroponics Plant Administrator with a degree in Botany and a Class Three Genengineer license. According to the specs, employee Nilsson was a plant waterer, a low level gene splicer, who checked up on the automated equipment.

His smile was broader now, which *really* bothered her, because his empathic rating in the personnel file had been 9. Which was slightly higher than a rock's. She blinked out of Pause.

"We need to sort a few things out," the man, Dane, said, his tone cold but without threat. "Why don't you come and eat with us, get a little rest?" It wasn't a suggestion. "Your hunter gave up. He must not have wanted you very badly."

But he had. His departure bothered her. A lot. Ahni scanned the crowded columns of growing things, senses straining for an echo of pursuit. None.

"He'll be back, won't he?"

"I . . . don't know." Humiliating. And scary. So far, they had known her moves as if she had handed them an itinerary . . . and that wasn't possible, because she'd been making them up as she went along ever since she'd stepped into that elevator lobby on Level Four. She needed to figure out *how*. But the kid-thing's presence pressed at her. Only one crime

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brought the death penalty. That was the dilution of human DNA with DNA from a nonhuman source. Maybe she should hope they *did* come after her. Caught between tiger and dragon? "I'll go with you," she said. As if it was a genuine invitation.

Nilsson eased closer with a complex shiver of muscles, utterly in control of his motion. He was a *whole* lot more skilled in microG than she was. She flinched as his fingers closed around her wrist, and felt annoyance at that give-away.

He towed her and she went limp, let him. The weird kid-thing came along behind her. The twining stems of green, the ease with which the two of them moved, made her think of swimming through a kelp bed. The pair oriented to the light, too, she noticed, just as the plants did. Here, light was Up, just as in the ocean. These leafy columns that reminded her of kelp were as thick as her body and they didn't sway the way the kelp stems did. The leaves remained still, unless you brushed them, and then their recoil was quick—a product of mass-in-motion transfer of momentum, rather than the damped sway of underwater stems. She caught a glimpse of translucent plastic where plants were small and there was space between them. Other tubes were thickly furred with plants. She identified a tube covered with beets, perfectly round crimson roots the size of her head, the thick, lush leaves red-veined and as large as an elephant's ear. Another tube sprouted the bright green leaves and red jewels of strawberries as large as real chicken eggs.

This . . . these strange versions of familiar items she paid little attention to on her plate . . . scared her. As did the kid-thing who carried death in his face, and the man's cold calm. Different rules applied up here, away from the Earth-familiar tourist level. And she didn't know them. Dane planted a toe here, ball of a foot there, nudging them smoothly and swiftly forward, barely disturbing the leaves. Bare feet. She studied the kid-thing from the corner of her eye. He was flanking her, and she had a sudden flashback to a vacation years ago, swimming off the family compound at the southern tip of Taiwan, suddenly surrounded by dolphins in the blue water.

The kid-thing had the "so what" attitude of the dolphins that had brushed against her, leaped over her, that day. *So who are you? What do we care? You don't belong here.*

I can kill you, she thought. With a word to the authorities. And this man, too.

They were slowing, had clearly reached a destination. She had expected some kind of structure. She saw nothing but green, but here the tubes seemed oddly close together, forming a solid wall of green. "In here," he said, let go of her, and slipped into what seemed to be a solid wall of leaves. Ahni hesitated, aware of the kid-thing's attention, like a finger prodding her. Then she shrugged, which set her immediately drifting, grabbed a handful of stems, and propelled herself clumsily between the close-set tubes.

A curtain of blossoms shimmered along the walls of a small open space, bright as living jewels. The light was muted here, filtered by the wall of leaves, and she realized that the tubes had been bent and spliced to form a spherical space. Nets woven from what appeared to be some kind of

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natural fiber were anchored amidst the blossoms, and she made out personal items, clothes, bedding. Clearly the man Dane lived here, among the blossoms. He pulled off his goggles, lodged them in a net full of junk, and rummaged in another for a squeeze of water. His eyes gleamed like pewter, contrasting sharply with his dark skin. He turned, easily, sent the squeeze of water sailing suddenly toward her, and, as she automatically caught it, only then did she become aware of her fierce thirst. "Thanks," she said, equal to equal. An honor he didn't acknowledge. She awkwardly settled herself in an empty net among sprays of purple-and-white flowers that looked like oversized orchids, and probably were.

Dane sent a fat orange-and-yellow fruit zipping toward the kid-thing, who snagged it with casual skill, damping his reaction with one foot, his long toes curling around the tube without bruising a single leaf. The kid cut into the fruit with a small blade and handed her a thick slice. Ahni touched it tentatively with her tongue. Blinked. "How do you get mango up here?"

"Dane engineered the plants to grow small like eggplants." The kid-thing grinned at her, the tips of his teeth showing, laughing at her again. "But they have big fruit. Dane's really good with genes and he's teaching me. It's like singing. I don't even have to think about it, really." He sliced more mango. "It's got a full complement of amino acids, too. He says that makes it a complete protein. So you don't really need to eat anything else." He bit into his slice, expertly catching tiny globules of juice with his tongue.

Koi. She remembered his name, studied him, the sweet mango juice a summer melody on her tongue. He was happy, excited, with a child's uncomplicated enjoyment of company, something new and interesting. He would be euthanized like a failed experiment if anyone in charge found out about him. You could do a lot with engineered human DNA—cure disease, extend life, regrow a damaged spine or a failed kidney. But bring in material from another species . . . turn a human being into a gilled water-creature with amphibian genes, or a furred little seal-girl, and you died. No appeal. No second chance. The Chaos Years had frightened all of humanity. So why hadn't this Dane person killed her?

Because he thought she was chipped, of course. He didn't know who she was—a Family daughter who didn't wear the ubiquitous ID chip, someone who had the single luxury that only power and birth could buy. Privacy. He assumed that if she died, the *where* would be on record, and so would the *how*. So she was safe. For the moment. Long enough to give her options. Ahni swallowed the sweetness of the mango. Tiny orange spheres of juice floated away from her lips. She wasn't at all good at catching them and Koi rolled his eyes at her, his disdain strong as the smell of dog piss. The tiny constellation of mango juice pearls drifted close to one of the tubes, this one planted with ruffled bells of pink-and-white. Ahni caught a flicker of motion, and, suddenly, one of the tiny droplets was gone. Fascinated, she watched as, one by one, the wayward juice drops vanished. With a jolt of recognition, she finally spotted the author of the movement. "A frog."

"Partly." Dane had finished his mango, was sending bits of the peel sailing into the greenery. "When the platforms were first built, the garden was pretty primitive. Blue-green algae, mostly, then a few plant species in the tubes. Hydroponics at its most basic, producing nutrition, but not

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much fun. And the plants took a lot of work. You had to pollinate, deal with fungus, and keeping the particle count down was a bear. Over the years . . . we . . . created a system that tends to itself."

He had meant to say something other than *we.* She kept her eyes on the frog, thinking that the word he had almost said had been *I.* Which couldn't be possible.

"The gardens clean the water for the entire platform," Dane went on. "It all comes here. The digester uses a sequence of aerated pools full of tailored bacteria strains and fish to recover the heavy metals and liquify any solid organics. Then it flows slowly through the tubes. They're full of granular polymer—an artificial soil we manufacture here and populate with a thriving bacterial ecosystem. The plants root in them and use the organic compounds. If you balance the variety just right, balance what they remove, the water that comes out is clean enough to drink." He touched a lavender orchid blossom reflectively. "I'd like to visit Dragon Wheel one day. They do rice. I'd like to see how they do that."

She glanced again at Koi as his sudden alert pricked her attention. She followed his gaze and had to use an instant of Pause to quell her reaction.

Two more of the strange faces peered from the flower-wall at her. She caught only a glimpse before they vanished, their fright like small bolts of blue lightning in the diffuse light. They had the same features as Koi, and she retained an image of long toes grasping delicately between the blossoms and leaves. One was a death-sentence risk. Why create more than one?

"Yes, there's a breeding population." Dane's pewter eyes fixed on her. "You'd be killing more than one. This isn't Earth." He leaned toward her, anchored in his net. "You think it is, you think that it's nothing more than another New York or Moscow, only stuck up in the sky with variable gravity as a nice tourist attraction. But you're wrong. This isn't Earth, and your Earthly boogie men under the bed don't scare us up here." He laughed softly, mirthlessly. "We have our own monsters."

"Dane . . . I'm sorry." Koi broke in, voice low and intense. "I know not to show . . . but he was *ugly,* and not supposed to be here, and she was like my baby sister when she was born, she couldn't even drift right. And . . . she was pretty."

Pretty, again. A child's crush-bright word. She had not been called "pretty" very often.

"It's all right." Dane's assurance was focused on Koi, with the feel of summer's warmth. "It's not a wrong thing, to save a life." He touched Koi's shoulder lightly, barely stirring him from where he floated. "She doesn't wear a chip, Koi. That's how come she surprised you like that. The locks won't keep her kind out. But they don't care about us." A flicker of his eyes challenged her. "They run the planet down below."

He knew she wasn't chipped. Ahni froze inside, her face impassive, body language unconcerned. She held his life in her hand, and he knew that he could kill her with impunity. If the gardens processed the waste from the entire orbital, a few more pounds of organic solids wouldn't be noticeable. "You're right. I'm a member of the Taiwan Family. My father sits on the World Council." She gave him truth, because that was all she

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had to offer and he would read a lie anyway. "Krator family killed my half-twin." She couldn't quite block the stab of those words, even now. "I don't know why they chose to unbalance relations like that. But they did." Stupid move. They didn't compete directly. "Our father . . . sent me to restore balance." She drew a slow breath that barely stirred her. "I do not particularly care what you do here."

"Balance." Dane's voice was low and charged with a still anger, like current in a powerful battery. "Killing does not restore balance."

Her Pause-mind measured the strength of his statement and told her that this applied to her, too, that this was why he hadn't fed her to his plants. Not a good survival strategy with Koi running around, but good, very good, for her immediate survival. Ahni shook her head. "Balance is killing only between Families. Is it so bad?" She didn't try to quell her anger at his narrow, Upside attitude. "Before the Families controlled Earth, people fought wars," she snapped. "A *lot* of people died. Millions. Most of them had nothing to do with the olddays corporations that were really doing the fighting. Or have you read any history? Only a few die in Family balance matters, and that . . . not very often." This time, it was Xai. *Ah, my brother!* "You're perfect up here? Nobody ever kills?"

"Not often," Dane admitted.

That truth troubled him. Ahni untangled herself from the mesh and pulled herself carefully between the flower tubes, needing to sort things out, to drop into full Pause and work out all the possible outcomes of this moment. She felt the two of them following her, not close, but there. Keeping watch. She ignored them, needing to focus on her next move and the immediate puzzle of how Krator had been able to anticipate her moves so accurately. Even more immediately, she needed to get out of here in one piece. Before this man found a way around his reluctance to kill. Moving randomly through the tubes, she became slowly aware of the small hum of lives around her. It reminded her of a summer forest's life-song. Everything worked here, she thought. Everything interlocked with everything else, the way the ecosystems of Earth might have worked way back before humans began to shape their world. He was wrong, she thought. This was like Earth. A peaceful Earth. She stifled a twinge of regret.

Ahead, she saw things moving, many things. Wary, she caught a tube coated with spirals of small green ovate leaves, holding herself still to watch. It was still too bright, and she squinted. Many-legged robots like gray alloy spiders minced along the tubes, a slowly expanding bladder trailing behind each one. She caught a glimpse of red and shaded her eyes. More beets, she decided at last. The robots were plucking the huge round balls from the surface of the tubes. Only a single tail of root penetrated the polymer and the harvester spiders plucked them with apparent ease. The tube seemed to seal instantly. They didn't take all, but apparently picked and chose, collecting just the right ones. Behind them, smaller robot spiders crept in the harvest-spiders' wake, four jointed front legs busy, dancing up and down as they moved slowly forward. Curious, she drifted nearer, because they were only robots. Planting, she realized. Each small spider left a tiny tuft of green in the space where the beet had been harvested. Ahni nudged herself gently forward, drifted

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over to the newly planted tube. The beet seedling sat in the center of the space vacated by the harvested beet, a tiny thread of root embedded in the translucent container. She touched the tube, found it resilient with a sluggish give that made her think of a gel. She poked it with her fingernail and her finger penetrated it easily. Cool. Wet. She pulled her finger out and the surface healed behind her, but not before a silvery drop of water escaped. Something small and green zipped out from the leaves, scooped up the water in trailing legs, and vanished into the shadows.

The intricacy of this place stunned her. Programs would do most of it, she thought. Balance harvest with planting, start adequate seeds in culture somewhere here, so that the planting-spiders could follow the harvesters. You could chart the eating habits of five million people, predict the trends, supply the restaurants and food shops, and clean the water while you were at it. Energy flooded in from the sun, free, ready to be turned into sugar, carbohydrates, and proteins.

This was not a hydroponics farm. This was a . . . garden. Created by this man, Dane, even though he couldn't be that old. She was certain of it. Ahni shook her head, which sent her drifting up against a tube planted with small leafy plants studded with green, unripe mangos like the one she had eaten. This place was a distraction, she thought. And she could not afford distraction. Whoever was waiting for her on the other side of the lock and the elevator was very very good. And he would not be distracted.

"Don't get in the way of them. There's not supposed to be anyone down here but Dane."

She turned at the sound of Koi's voice, noted that she was getting better at damping reaction to her movements. "The spiders?" she asked.

He looked blank, but nodded when she gestured toward the slow steady scuttle of the robots. "Them," he agreed. "They've got a video link and nobody probably ever looks at it, but somebody might." He shrugged. "It's a secure Security link, so Dane can't fix it. Here." Koi thrust something at her. "Dane told me to give you this. He said you'll go blind if you don't use them."

Goggles. The small thick lenses were what Dane had worn out here in the perpetual flood of photons. He was no longer following, she realized. She slipped them on, her squint relaxing as the glare dimmed.

Koi drifted gently closer, his curiosity pricking at her. He had pupils after all, she realized. But the lenses of his eyes were cloudy, as if he had cataracts. "You can see?" she asked him.

"Oh yeah." He blinked at her. "I don't need goggles. My eyes filter the light so that it won't damage the inside, you know? Dane said we drift. Like he does with the plants and things, only it just happens in us—to our genes, I mean, and really fast. He called it a shift, and he said that's why so many babies die." He looked away from her, gently grieving. "Like my baby sister. Why did that man kill your brother?" He twisted idly, upside down to her now, his long toes wrapped around one of the little mango shrubs. "And what's a half-twin? I don't understand."

Gene shift? Ahni eyed his long limbs, realizing that she hadn't been dreaming, that there was a hint of flexibility in his long bones. A pretty extreme genetic shift, even accounting for increased radiation up here.

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"It's a long story," she said. Generations long. "I don't really know *why* they killed Xai." Already, economic levers were being applied, nudging small pebbles that would, in turn, dislodge stones, that would, in turn, send economic boulders crashing down on Krator business interests. Individuals would suffer in this silent war as a vegetable business lost its loan here, a metals importer had her down-porting license revoked there, an info-service lost its creative talent, or a small company had to pay more for shipping their wares. Why? She shook her head, thinking that Xai could have told her. He was better at the three-dimensional chess game of alliance and betrayal than she was. Huang Family had nothing that Krator wanted. "He's my half-twin," she said slowly, "because we have the same mother and were born on the same day. Are there a lot of you?"

Koi's uncomprehending look didn't change. "A lot" didn't seem to mean much more than "spiders" had. "There's my family." His shiver of worry sent him drifting. "Dane's scared. I've . . . never seen him scared."

"I'm not going to tell anyone, Koi." She loaded those words with truth and they *were* truth. Because Koi and his family were a lever to move Dane one day, assuming she left here alive. And you never threw away a lever. You never knew when it might be useful. "It's all right. How do you live?"

Suddenly, Koi's "family" was all around her, as if he had called them. She controlled her reaction before her corticosteroid level could spike. The small prickly locii of curiosity formed a loose constellation around her. They were *fast* when they moved, darting like dragonflies in her mother's garden. They looked as fragile as dragonflies, too. She caught flashing glimpses of slender limbs, those strange, milky, blind-looking eyes.

"We just live." Koi's shrug didn't set him moving at all.

Ahni drew a slow breath. "Can you show me a way out, Koi?"

"I guess." Disappointment tinted his tone. "Dane said it's okay for you to go. But it's nice up here," he said wistfully.

He had a crush on her. The realization made her smile and he smiled back, hopefully. "Are you going to stay? It's safe. Dane doesn't let anyone come up here."

Except me and my private war. Ahni shook her head slowly, grabbing a column of young plants to dampen her torque. "I have to go home," she said. "Maybe I'll come back one day, okay?"

"Okay." Still disappointed, Koi pushed himself gently off with one toe. "I'll show you another way down. Nobody uses it but Dane. If you can really go through the locked doors."

"Probably." She stretched her senses, but Dane was a long way away. He was a fool to let her go . . . but he did not strike her as a fool. So something else was at play here. But she needed to get out of here. Her pursuer would bring in backup, and her thorn patch wasn't good cover any more. There were ways to find her, even down here, even without a chip. "Show me the way down, Koi," she told him, loading her words with as much truth as she could manage, hoping he was sensitive enough to feel it. "I won't get you in trouble."

He gave her one more yearning-puppy look, then pushed off with his long toes, gliding forward in a perfect trajectory between the thickly planted tubes. She followed, clumsy, but managing to keep up with him,

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although she left drifting leaves and bruised fruit and vegetables in her wake. He was making sure that she could follow him, but, even so, she tired quickly. This unfamiliar type of movement, struggling not to send herself out of control, was wearing. "What do you know about the world outside of here?" she asked as he paused, pretending to consider the route. She had a feeling her growing fatigue was obvious. "Do you have any . . . stories about where you came from?"

"Dane said we came up from down below. Where you come from. We can't ever go back. Dane says we'd die."

"Aren't you curious?"

"About what?" His surprise was genuine.

Ahni shook her head, because this was not the time. "Nothing," she said. "How much farther is the elevator?"

"Not far." He grinned. "Real close now."

And she felt them. Coming fast. She didn't know what they had, something to trace her, but they knew she was there. One was the man who had darted her before. She recognized his bright hunter's certainty. The other's icy determination made her guess he was the man who had been waiting for her at the elevator. That determination tasted coppery with vengeance.

"Run," she snapped at Koi, pointing away from their pursuers. "They've spotted us." She grabbed a tube thick with ripening strawberries, spun herself around and pushed off with her foot, heedless of the crushed berries and shredded leaves. She shot forward, at the edge of control, guiding herself crudely with her hands, ricocheting off tube after tube, leaving a visible trail of damage behind her. They wouldn't need anything technical to track her. A tube thick with something round and green like guavas appeared in front of her. She pushed off with one hand, spiraled off at a tangent, utterly out of control now. Felt the twin cold novas of triumph behind her, caught a tube with her good hand, damping her momentum, green shreds of leaves erupting in a cloud as she twisted, planted a foot hard on the tube and shot away from that "gotcha" gloating behind her. Maybe not! Intent on the narrow spaces between the leaves, she lucked out, arrowing between thickly leafed tubes into a relatively clear space where the tiny plantlets must have been newly inserted. She soared through the narrow clearing and into the leaves on the other side, leaving no trace of her passage. Let herself slow. "Koi?" She twisted cautiously, expecting to find him on her heels. "I need another way down."

He wasn't there, and then she felt him. Terror and pain, flaring like lightning in the quiet of the garden, so bright and intense that she caught her breath, feeling as if someone had punched her in the stomach. Another fierce white-hot spike, and with it, the "gotcha" triumph.

They had been after Koi, not her.

Best choice; find the nearest alternative elevator and get out. Not her problem. Ahni pushed off, caught a tube planted to tomatoes, kicked hard, and headed back along her trail of damage, trying to move cautiously, searching for Koi's fear.

She touched the silver knife blade of his terror. It was faint, getting fainter.

Way too fast.

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She kicked off from a tube and launched herself recklessly, but it was too late. She burst from the leafy shadows of the tubes and into a wash of light that made her squint in spite of her goggles. An elevator. The wide, matte gray portal looked odd and out of place in the lush greenery. She hurtled into the wall of the enormous tube, tucking head and shoulder, rolling, and killing her momentum with her feet and knees, bruising herself but maintaining control.

They had taken Koi down with them.

As she clung to the alloy frame around the portal, something metallic and blue caught her eye. It hung in the air in the clear space around the elevator portal, turning slowly in the harsh light. Gently, Ahni pushed off and drifted closer. A bracelet. A hotel key, she realized. The new fad. A pretty bracelet to match your business singlet, but inside, the chip to open your door, turn on the lights and the enviro controls. . . .

They had left the key behind.

For her.

It tumbled very slowly end over end, moving in a slow steady trajectory toward the first of the leaf-covered tubes. Ahni stretched out a hand for the bracelet as she crossed its trajectory, hesitated, thinking of all the things that could be hidden in that twisted circlet of cheap plastic. Touched it.

Nothing happened.

She plucked it lightly from the air, as if it were a poisoned fruit. An invitation? An offer? A bright puzzle piece to toss with all the other tiny pieces that had showered around her since that hours-ago trip through the Arrival Hall, like how had Krator known her moves seemingly as soon as she did? And how had her pursuers followed her so unerringly? Why had they taken Koi?

Like bright fragments of glass, they tumbled, razor-edged in her mind, swirling microG slowly . . . to form a pattern.

Of course. She had been so blind. *Stupid.*

Gently, Ahni's fingers closed over the blue bracelet key. She slipped it into a pocket in her singlesuit, sealed it carefully closed. She pushed off the elevator door, and drifted back into the planted tubes, noting that all traces of her headlong rush had nearly disappeared. Here and there, she caught a tiny stir of motion as some scavenger darted out to snag a drifting scrap of leaf or bruised blossom.

Dropping into Pause, she called up the NYUp specs and plotted her way back to Dane's private hideaway.

He met her halfway. Which impressed her, because that was good range, even for a Class One. His thunderstorm anger was tinged with a fear that tasted of iron. "What happened to him?"

"They took him," she said, tired beyond belief. Had it really been less than a day since she had stepped off that shuttle with her clever "tired traveler" walk, her grief walled away so that it wouldn't distract her? Love was more dangerous. It could blind you.

"You and your damned war," Dane growled.

"Who's at fault here?" Rage seized her. "*You* created him. You made him something that they'll treat like an animal. Don't blame *me* for this—this is your doing!"

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He stretched out a hand, damped his drift to utter stillness, face shadowed by leaves. "I thought you were getting it," he said in a soft, flat tone. "I thought maybe one Earthsider could figure it out. That this *is not Earth.* Your rules don't work up here, don't you get it? We keep track of everybody now, but there have been some rough periods since the first space station got bolted together up here. Some people must have . . . slipped through the cracks as the orbital platforms grew. That's what I guess anyway. And they started living up here, maybe in storage space at first, stealing food from the primitive hydroponics. Must have been pretty grim." His pewter eyes bored into hers. "You got to wonder what it was that was worse, down below. But that's all I can figure out. Oh, I thought someone made them, too. Then I did a gene-scan. They're just as much Homo sapiens as you and I are. I don't know what's driving the changes—and, oh yes, they're still changing." His eyes gleamed. "Our siblings, Earthsider? Or maybe . . . our successors?"

Successors. A chill walked Ahni's spine. Because he believed it. "So then you're safe," she said softly. "Why hide them?"

"You threw history at me a little while ago." Anger flashed in his eyes. "We have a history of hating anyone with a different face or hair. What about something like Koi?"

"That's in the past," Ahni snapped.

"Is it?" Dane said softly. "Rats."

She blinked at him, uncomprehending.

"That's how the last supervisor listed them in the database." Dane drifted close, so close that she could feel his breath on her face. "Temperature, humidity, crop mass, ripeness percentages, rats exterminated. It took me awhile to figure out what he meant, when I took over."

He had to be lying.

"I'm not. He was probably afraid somebody would think he'd created them." Dane's tone was coldly reflective. "Or maybe they just scared him. Because they were . . . different. He killed quite a few. I found some of the traps. High voltage. Neurotoxins. Very creative. There weren't many left. They don't reproduce well. I think a lot of pregnancies get reabsorbed. It wouldn't take much to eliminate them all. Why do they exist?" His voice dropped to a whisper. "What are they? What do they mean, Earthsider? To *us?* This isn't your world."

Ahni looked away, vision absorbed by the seemingly endless columns of green. She took a breath of the heavy air. It smelled . . . wrong. Not like the Amazon, not like the lush tropical greenery of New Taipei. Not like Earth. "I can get him back," she said, her words leaden. "You must have a gene sequencer . . . an official model? With a time/date labeler? Uncompromisable?" No one was allowed to play with genes, unrecorded.

He was nodding. "Standard agribusiness model," he said, his eyes on her face.

She unsealed her pocket and took out the blue bracelet key. "I don't know how many traces are there. I need hard copy. Signed, sealed, and presentable to the World Council if need be." She held it out.

He took it, closed-up and unreadable again. Looked from it to her. "Do you want to give me a clue whose DNA you're looking for?"

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"You'll know."

"I'll need a sample from you."

She held out an arm and he pulled a sampler capsule from a pocket of his singlesuit, popped it open, and scraped the inside of her forearm lightly. Pocketing it, he turned, gently prodding his body around with one bare foot. "Signed, sealed, and delivered, coming up." And he arrowed away.

She followed, barely keeping him in sight. He wasn't really trying to lose her, wasn't trying not to lose her, either. She thought about Koi's delicate bones that had never known even the moon's gentle gravity, much less near Earth Normal. Tried to ignore her estimates on his survival. When Dane vanished into an alloy-gray cluster of cylindrical pods nested in tubes and leaves—it would be the genen lab and probably the control center of the garden—she waited outside, drifting in the fierce flood of energy from Sol, nearly able to *hear* the growth of the thick, oversized spinach leaves that brushed her arms and legs lightly. Tiny lives hunted and feared and satisfied hunger all around her. Dane's creations . . . whoever he was. Whatever he was.

If she went up to the tourist levels, she could walk into an upscale restaurant, sit down to a pricy dinner of Pasta Alfredo, with fresh vegetables from these tubes, and aged Parmigiana, made from soy beans that grew here somewhere. She and Xai, as kids, had run away to the tide pools whenever they could. They would gather their lunch there—small molluscs and crabs, silvery fish, eaten fresh and raw and briny, a feast of life eating life. They raced each other across the small bay. She remembered when she had won, one hot afternoon. *You cheat!* Xai had shrieked, his face twisted. *You're her daughter and her race are better swimmers. I hate you for cheating!*

She had let him win after that, and then he would find the best tidbits for her—the delicate rosettes of seaweed, briny and fresh, tiny crabs, who merged their life essence with yours as your teeth crunched down on them. Ahni watched a crystal bead of salt water drift from her face. A tiny creature like a dragonfly soared from the leaf shadows to snag the droplet in trailing legs, then vanished.

She was dreaming, started awake at Dane's touch, the dream fading before she could recall it. Found herself looking into Dane's eyes, his hand on her arm. She had drifted up against a tube planted with spinach and he towed her gently free of the leaves.

"You said half-twin," he said, still holding her gaze. "Which one was the implant? Him?"

The urge to glance away was automatic. "Yes," she said. "He's our father's clone."

He sighed, which surprised her. When you didn't wear a chip, you could do a lot. Cloning wasn't exactly legal, but . . . it happened. "I was an accident." She shrugged.

He didn't believe her. "This is the half-twin you said was dead?"

"So I . . . believed." She clamped down hard on her emotions, but guessed he could read them anyway. "His . . . body was destroyed in an ac-

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cident. We identified him by . . . DNA traces at the scene." Blood. His blood. "You have the documentation?"

"In a no-copy legal encryption file." He held out a small portable link.

She took it, accessed her own link, opening her private netspace in the shade of oversized spinach leaves. She touched her password out on the English alphabet letters that floated in the air, repeated it as the letters glimmered and morphed into Chinese ideographs, and lifted the link to her face for the retinal scan. A shimmering image of rocky tide pools announced her entry into her personal netspace. The legal encryption file appeared as a white tabletop with a blank cube on it. She touched the cube and it turned into an old-fashioned paperback novel with a blank cover.

Picking up an ink brush that lay handy on the wet black rocks, she titled the book with quick, sloppy calligraphy that would have made her grandmother rap her knuckles with her carved ivory backscratcher. Then she laid the book into a small dark cave at the edge of the waves. It vanished. She touched the link and the rocky pools vanished. Suppressing a swift pang of grief, she handed the portable back to Dane. He offered the blue bracelet and she accepted it, slipped it onto her wrist. "Thank you," she said formally.

"I'm coming with you," Dane said. "Don't forget." He touched his singlesuit. "A uniform has some leverage."

She shook her head. "His trained dogs will let me by," she said. "Not you." And pushed off, heading slowly and carefully toward the elevator where she had found the bracelet.

He didn't argue. But he followed her to the elevator and entered it with her. She slipped into the padded straps across from Dane. "Level Six," he said, and the straps pressed her shoulders as the elevator began to slip "downward." Six would be the first level where a hotel-registered tourist would have legal access, Ahni guessed.

Level Six, the elevator voice murmured, as the pressure on the straps eased, and the doors whispered open to reveal a featureless hall painted a pale green. There was a definite *down* now. Ahni drew a slow breath, lifted her hand, and presented the bracelet to the scanner. The doors whispered closed and the elevator dropped again.

Her weight grew and Ahni swayed slightly, regaining her balance as her legs began to support her once more. She wondered if they would go clear to One, after all, but the elevator stopped at Three. The doors whispered open and a purple arrow glowed to life in the matte-blue carpet of the elevator lobby, fine as a brushstroke. This was where she had started. She followed the arrow, and, as she stepped across it, another one lighted a few meters ahead. The corridor was busy but not crowded. Men and women passed briskly, natives and Earthsiders, their steps light in the slight gravity, preoccupied, anticipating, worried. . . . The murmur of their emotions filled the air like whispering as she followed the beckoning arrows. A vendor in a wide stretch of hallway lined with shops sold skewers of baby vegetables from a cart. She caught the scent of curry as she strode past. From the corner of her eye, she saw Dane pause to buy one, obviously not interested in her or her path. He did it well. She felt a small relief, because the dogs would be ruthless.

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A Northamerican style coffee shop bustled, the patrons down here mostly native, a wild mix of Euro, Latino, Afroamerican, and Amerind genes. A pair of young Asian men in cheap business singlesuits played virtual mahjong above a tiny game projector, their faces identically intent. But the smaller one with the Guangzhou face couldn't mask the nanosecond razor-glint of his recognition as she passed. Dragon Wheel dogs. Not Krator. Of course. That's why an orbital. That was why her pursuer had been so comfortable in microG. But why not Dragon Wheel itself?

Beneath her feet, the arrows beckoned her left, down a side corridor that seemed to be hotel rooms mixed with residential rooms that sported personal holographs or even two-D murals in bright colors. A tiny pot of holographic petunias decorated the wall beside one bright lavender door. The purple arrow appeared in front of the third door in a featureless row of hotel rooms, winked out as she stopped in front of it. She sensed the Mahjong players behind her, not attacking, just watchful. No sign of Dane. Good.

She didn't bother to touch the door pad. They would have let him know by now.

And their alarm wasn't even necessary. She could feel him on the other side of the door. Just as he could feel her. It had always been like that between them.

The door slid open, and even though she had felt him, the physical reality of his round tawny face with the pure Taiwanese features—unlike her own face, shaped by her mother's mixed geneset—shocked her. His hair was slightly mussed, as if she had interrupted him in a moment of relaxation. She met his eyes, closing up her emotions, her control so tight that it was nearly Pause. "You look very healthy." She said it in Taiwanese, made it an insult with her tone, watched the skin tighten over his broad cheekbones so that his complexion lightened. He said nothing, simply stood aside, ushering her into his private space with the same grace he'd use to usher in any honored guest.

Banishing a twinge of unreality, she noted the basic no-frills carpeting and furnishings. Roughing it. She swallowed a sudden desire to laugh, felt the flicker of her half-twin's response.

"I expected our father." He turned aside to a basic kitchen wall. "Tea?"

She nodded, so polite. He should have come. Their father. It was his duty to restore the balance, to take the vengeance for his more-than-son's death. His order had shocked her. And then she had understood. He was afraid. Of leaving Earth. She felt Xai's impatience, waiting for her to explain.

She said nothing. They might be in his suite in the family compound, watching as he spooned tea into a small clay-colored pot, touched a wall-set spigot to fill it with steaming water. From the garden, filtered by mangos, mei qing choi, and spinach. She accepted a steaming cup, and it came to her that this was why the man in the elevator lobby had fumbled his attack. He had expected The Huang and had checked with Xai. . . .

"You would have killed our father?"

He concentrated on his tea, lips tight, but he could never hide from her. Ahni set her tea down, untasted.

"There was no other way!" Xai spun away from her, flung his cup at the wall. It didn't shatter, bounced off. "He's never going to let me do anything.

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He just sees me as a younger, more energetic body that can run around doing what he tells me to. I'll never be anything but a vehicle, a body he can use, don't you get it? At least you get to be a person, my mongrel little sister."

The acid in his tone stung like a slap. "You're wrong," Ahni said.

"Don't give me that empath stuff. You don't know." He turned away from her. "Li Zhen has the same problem. That's why he got stuck up here, running Dragon Wheel for his father. To keep him out of the way. Well, we have our own concerns going, and both the Taiwan and China families are going to learn about the cost of their own shortsightedness. We'll end up with our own Council seat." He looked back at her, his attention sharpening. "I made a mistake." He drew a deep breath. "I underestimated your ability. I realized that when you showed up here. I should have talked to you first."

"Xai." She didn't look at him. "What is this all about? Our mother is . . . grieving."

"I know."

She felt the flicker of his pain.

"There's no other way."

"What about Krator Family? What about the small people who get hurt because our father thinks Krator killed you?"

Xai shrugged. "Make up your mind, little sister."

Interview was at an end. Ahni could feel the Dragon Wheel dogs beyond the door. Inside her head, a vista of the tide pools unfurled, and she heard their laughter as they, children, explored and reveled in those complex and beautiful puddles. Childhood fantasy. She banished the image forever from her mind. "I came to offer you a trade, elder brother." Her voice sounded leaden in her ears. "You give me the deformed child you took from the axle." She raised her head to meet her brother's dark stare. "And I'll cancel the automatic send to our parents of the sealed, time-dated, and legal-encrypted DNA analysis from that hotel key. Surely you realized that a NYUp employee who was manipulating plant genes would have licensed documentation regimens in place?"

He hadn't. Perhaps he had been sure of her answer. His surprise that she would be that clever was revelatory and humiliating in the same instant. "It won't change anything if you send it," he said finally.

"Don't underestimate our father," she said softly. "He's *you,* remember?" Perhaps ruthlessness, the ability to set family aside for personal gain, was nothing more than a series of coupled amino acids.

Xai was thinking hard behind a slight sneer. There was no way out. She'd gone over the scenario a hundred times since she had found that key and realized who had left it for her.

"You can have the cripple." Her half-twin shrugged. "I take it that this is your 'no' to my offer?" He tried to mask his icy rage with a smile. "You are a fool."

"Perhaps." She met his stare, closed off, letting his anger beat against her.

"Ugly, that cripple." He shivered with distaste. "I won't even ask how you came to assume that debt, little sister, but it's an expensive one." He smiled, sure that he had won now, gestured with his chin. "Your puppy dog is in there."

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The suite had a second bedroom. Inside, Koi lay on the smart-foam mattress, his eyes glassy, wrists and ankles bound with the wide straps of humane restraints. His ribs jutted against his skin with each labored breath.

"What happened to him, anyway?" Her brother looked over her shoulder, his distaste dank in the room. "Radiation? Disease?"

"Yes." Ahni went over to the bed, wondering about brain damage, spontaneous fractures. His gaze focused as she leaned over him, and a bright spark flared in his eyes. She released the restraints, wrapped the light thermal sheet around him and scooped him into her arms. He weighed so little, like an infant, as if his long bones were hollow, made of air.

"Li will not be happy with me when he finds out that I gave our bait away. He seems very . . . interested in that thing."

She shrugged and started for the door.

"The file?"

"Open a link for me."

She dropped into Pause, accessed her link, the tide pool appearing on her eyelid screen. She retrieved the calligraphed paperback book from its cache and dropped it into the carved ivory box that was Xai's mailbox.

Xai nodded and blinked as he exited his own implanted link. "You could still be part of this. I underestimated you and . . . I apologize."

Truth. She heard it, was tempted for one aching moment. Shook her head.

"Your choice. I will not offer again."

Truth again. The door slid open and she walked out into the corridor. He bowed slightly as she left. "You are a woman of honor," he said, and it was a threat.

"I do not want to be the one who tells our mother that you are still alive and well." She turned on her heel and walked quickly down the corridor. The mah jong players glanced up as she walked by, not bothering to be subtle this time. Their eyes followed her, reminding her of the trained guard dogs in the family compound, the way the wide, sleek heads swiveled to watch visitors, eyes darkly intent, waiting for a command to attack. Even their disappointment felt like the dogs'.

Dane fell in beside her two corridors over, saying nothing, his fear and worry like a smoldering fire. When he took Koi's fragile body from her, she let him. People passed them: service staff, the mid-level business travelers who rented rooms at this level, even a trio of economy tourists, peering at maps and talking loudly about restaurants and views.

None of them looked . . . not so that they *saw.*

We don't see what we don't believe in, she thought. Perhaps that is our blind spot as a race. And the hairs rose briefly on the back of her neck.

They rose through the residence levels, the manufacturing levels, the elevator pausing until she and Dane had donned the padded harness. As they reached the bright, stunning heart of the orbital, Koi stirred and whimpered.

"I couldn't breathe." Remembered terror still glossed his eyes. "They hurt me," he gasped, his confusion and pain bright as the Axle light to Ahni's awareness. Emerging finally into the searing light and greenery, she followed Dane, able to keep up as he propelled himself carefully

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through the tubes of human waste that grew huge, and familiar vegetables that cleansed the water and fed the chattering tourists, residents, and hurrying business visitors. She saw the others now. They flanked them on all sides, darting shadows among the greenery. She counted fifteen, maybe sixteen, sensed curiosity. No worry, no fear, just . . . curiosity. A breeding population, enough, but not too many. Changing. Shifting into . . . what?

Dane took Koi to the control center, with its bright visitor access, its gleaming surfaces, its machines, screens, data-storage tanks. There was a small med-center there. She wondered just what his bio-specs looked like, compared to, say, her own. Koi whimpered. Dane closed the unit around him, murmuring like you'd murmur to a nervous animal, soothing it.

"Is he going to be okay?" She tried to peer over his shoulder at the tiny holo screen, but Dane's lanky frame blocked her view. "What happened to him?"

"Some broken bones, minor internal damage." Dane's tone was cold. "They weren't gentle with him." He kept a hand on Koi's face until the boy's eyes glazed and went vacant. "It'll do enhanced healing while he's out. He should recover." His expression told her nothing, but he didn't hide the leap of his relief from her. Then that relief tarnished and darkened as he fixed his gaze on her. "You gave him that sealed file?"

"Yes."

"It had to be valuable information. Why?"

She met his eyes, hesitated, not sure she could put it into words. "Because I brought our war up here," she said at last. "And you're right. This is not Earth. I am taking my war back to Earth with me." If she survived the trip. She bowed her head fractionally. "Li Zhen, Chairman of Dragon Wheel, saw Koi. I think he realized what he was seeing. My brother did not."

"You know that your brother is alive," Dane said softly. "If that's important and he has the file . . . will he try to kill you?"

Ahni drew a slow breath, stilled her drift with one finger. "If it's important to him. Yes."

"I have friends who are asteroid miners. They come and go. I can find you a ride to one of the Elevators—a ride that your brother can't track."

She met his pewter-colored gaze. "Thank you," she said. She had not been sure at all who would win the race downside.

"If you ever need a place to go. This place is . . . more protected than it seems." He fished something from his singlesuit, held it out. A tiny polished stone wound in silver wire dangled from a bracelet-sized chain. "A link. You can contact me."

She took it. The translucent stone, pale amber whorled with flecks of gold like an embedded galaxy, seemed heavy for its weight. She slipped it into her pocket. "I'd like to come back," she said. "To see how Koi is making out. To see if you've figured out . . . why they are."

For a moment, he merely looked at her, then his eyes lightened slightly, and Ahni realized that she was feeling his smile. "Any time," he said.

She nodded and made her way out of the control center to wait for the ride he'd find her. She pushed off—not too clumsily—and let herself drift through the green light of the Axle, surrounded suddenly by the darting silvery shadows of Koi's family. ○

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SIGNS YOUR DOMESTIC ROBOT NEEDS A TUNE-UP

Forgets to chill the salad forks
and sometimes heats them.

Still addresses you as "Sir" or "Madam"
but doesn't sound as if it means it.

Tells the delivery man that
you are living under an alias.

Insists on wearing a sombrero
when it serves enchiladas.

Has started keeping
dust bunnies as pets.

Walks in endless circles,
robot palm to robot brow,
mumbling: "The horror! The horror!"

Tells the delivery man about
the locked door in the cellar
that is entirely a product
of the corrupted circuits
of its robotic dementia praecox.

Spends too much time
yakking with other robots.

Asks to be called "Charlene."

– Bruce Boston

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Small Press Roundup

Once again, as these things seem regularly to happen, I find myself snowed under by a veritable paper-blizzard of fine small-press titles, only a fraction of which I can cover here. But this is hardly a cruel fate for me, and I promise never to complain.

Novels and Novellas

Critic and scholar Douglas Anderson is responsible for what surely has to be one of the most delightful literary resurrections in a dog's years. After almost one hundred and eighty years, a witty, satirical fable sees the light of day again, thanks to his efforts. *The Rebellion of the Beasts* (Wicker Park Press, hardcover, $21.95, 151 pages, ISBN 0-89733-520-1), published anonymously in 1825 and attributed with good reason to the Romantic poet Leigh Hunt (friend to Byron, Shelley, and their crowd), forms a prototype for George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). A general revolt by intelligent animals, fishes, reptiles, birds, and insects manages to overthrow man's dominion, practically exterminating our species. But that's only the first half of the novel. What happens when the anthropomorphic animals try ruling themselves forms the second part, when, under a dictatorial Jackass king, they invariably begin to recapitulate mankind's follies. Hunt's wickedly cynical jabs are counterbalanced by the tenderness evinced toward abused domestic beasts in the first portion of the tale. His Swiftian inventiveness is boundless ("kissing tails" is the approved way of showing respect in the new realm, even when it's a human approaching an animal), and the first-person narration by one "John Sprat" limns a convincing personality. Anyone imagining that this book is outdated, since it focuses its anger on a monarchy, should check out the passage on page sixty-two that describes how a threatened state's first reaction is to curtail civil liberties. That could never happen nowadays, right?

It's been a lonely time since we've heard from Marcos Donnelly, whose debut novel, *Prophets for the End of Time* (1998), was a rousing bit of theologically inclined SF. But now Donnelly returns with similar heady stuff in *Letters from the Flesh* (Robert J. Sawyer Books, hardcover, $19.95, 191 pages, ISBN 0-88995-302-3). Parallel epistolary tracks converge in a singular revelation about the nature of the universe. In one era, we eavesdrop on the correspondence of the historical Saul of Tarsus, aka St. Paul. Yet these are not Paul's well-known epistles, but rather communications with aliens. For Paul, we learn, is really a shell inhabited by a non-material entity from the stars, who finds Earth a most perplexing place. In the present, we intercept the e-mails from scientist Lillian Uberland to her cousin Mikey, a high-school teacher

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caught up in the evolution-versus-creationism controversy. Both tracks are filled with vivid and richly detailed characters and incidents, all of which cohere to make some lively philosophical points. Writing like a combination of Howard Hendrix and Paul Park, Donnelly gives his "ghost in the machine" thesis a thorough workout.

Based on his novella *Jigsaw Men* (PS Publishing, trade paper, $16.00, 103 pages, ISBN 1-902880-77-3), Gary Greenwood is an author to watch. This deft, thrilling, steampunk excursion into an alternate continuum where Martian Heat-Ray technology and the perfection of Doctor Frankenstein's researches have resulted in a world-dominating twenty-first-century British Empire is one of the grandest counterfactual rides going, even given the welter of such lately. Detective Livingstone of the London police force is assigned the case of investigating the disappearance of a politician's daughter. He rapidly finds himself involved in much more than a simple kidnapping, as the girl surfaces in a "Jigsaw" pornography video (the omnipresent Frankenstein revenants are called Jigsaw Men due to their stitching). As Livingstone tracks one lead to the next, he discovers a deadly plot by disgruntled American terrorists that threatens global stability. Greenwood inserts canny infodumps that never detour the fluid action, all the while building a believable portrait of a charmingly skewed world. The tale ends with a promise of more, and I for one look forward to revisiting this milieu.

One of the most accomplished novel debuts to attract my attention in some time can be found in Chris Beckett's *The Holy Machine* (Wildside, trade paper, $17.95, 242 pages, ISBN 1-59224-210-3). In its portrayal of a dystopian world, Beckett can stand shoulder to shoulder with Orwell and Burgess. In his focus on what separates (or unites) man and machine, he is cousin to Philip K. Dick. In his spiritual speculations, he reminds me of Anthony Boucher. In short, he's assimilated many classical influences and transformed them into a unique new vision. In Beckett's near-future scenario, the entire world has been swept by a variegated wave of savage religious fundamentalism known as the Reaction. One last redoubt of science and rationalism remains in the newly formed Mediterranean nation of Illyria. Our protagonist is George Simling (note the echoes of "simulacra" in his last name), who happens to fall in love with an android prostitute named Lucy. George's subsequent derangement and Lucy's transcendence form the bulk of the tale. Beckett beautifully and concretely evokes the mundane circumstances of George's transgressive odyssey while never beating the reader over the head with its larger significance. This is a book rich with pathos, misery, and hope, rather like what we all imagined the Kubrick-Spielberg film *A.I.* (2002) might have been. A triumph.

In *The Hunger of Time* (E-Reads, trade paper, $17.95, 252 pages, ISBN 0-7592-5512-1), Damien Broderick and Rory Barnes have unleashed one of the most satisfying cosmic romps in a long time. As if Rudy Rucker had collaborated with Olaf Stapledon, or H.G. Wells with Neal Stephenson, these authors have managed to combine vigorous and mind-croggling cosmological speculations with enter-

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tainingly off the wall dialogue and characterization. Stylistically slick, relentlessly zooming forward so fast it catches up with its own tail, this book will leave you gob-smacked. Our story opens in the near future. A global plague is about to destroy civilization. But luckily our protagonists—husband and wife Hugh and Grace D'Anzso, their daughters Natalie and Suzanna, and the family dog, Ferdy—have an escape hatch. Genius Hugh has perfected an interdimensional vacuole that exists outside of time and space. Sequestered inside, the family can leap forward in time—with one catch: every jump is exponentially larger than the prior one. Luckily, the jumps start small. The family ventures forward one year, then fourteen, then a few hundred, seeking the perfect place to stop. Well, they don't quit traveling till the years mount up into the trillions, and there's a hell of a lot of weirdness to encounter along the way. Narrated by Natalie, this tale possesses the pulp vigor of a 1930s Jack Williamson story with the sophistication to be found in Broderick's non-fiction opus, *The Spike* (2002). And in one of their cleverest nods to past SF, these authors have rehabilitated one of Heinlein's most controversial novels, *Farnham's Freehold* (1964), right down to the incestuous subtext. Do you recall Papa Farnham's first name? Hubert, it was. . . .

Single-Author Collections

Stagestruck Vampires and Other Phantasms (Tachyon Publications, hardcover, $24.95, 256 pages, ISBN 1-892391-21-X), by Suzy McKee Charnas, exhibits the author at her wide-ranging best. Containing such well-known award-winners as "Boobs" and "Unicorn Tapestry," this collection also features fascinating non-fiction, discussing Charnas's involvement in the theater, among other topics. In a story such as "Listening to Brahms," where the last survivors of a doomed Earth manage inadvertently to launch a kind of cultural, semiotic virus on the aliens who befriend them, Charnas proves that she can take global tragedies and extract the most minute yet potent seed of hope from the rubble. Three linked stories comprise a nuanced portrait of her vampiric antihero Dr. Weyland. With its Leiberesque love affair with the stage, this entertaining volume deserves to run as long as *Cats*.

Reading the award-winning fiction of David Langford is like getting a guided tour of the history of fantastical literature with a witty and knowledgeable guide who embroiders his own whimsies on the tapestry being displayed. In his new collection, *Different Kinds of Darkness* (Cosmos Books, trade paper, $17.95, 286 pages, ISBN 1-59224-122-0), Langford proves himself adept at everything from New Wave experimentalism (his first story, "Heatwave," from 1975, stands up remarkably well) to cyberpunk ideation (the four "blit" stories, about brain-eating ideograms, including the Hugo-winning title piece, have been widely hailed by everyone from Sterling to Egan). Langford also turns his hand to pure fantasy and horror, and while he's generally regarded as a humorist and there are plenty of comedic bits in this volume, he can nonetheless convincingly craft a grim tale of apocalypse such as

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"Cube Root." And his witty afterwords to each story are further inducement to purchase this antiblit, brain-enhancing book.

If you've been following *Interzone* over the past few years, you've surely encountered the amazing stories of French writer (and aeronautical engineer) Jean-Claude Dunyach. If you haven't been so lucky, now's your chance to acquaint yourself with his work, in the form of *The Night Orchid* (Black Coat Press, trade paper, $20.95, 279 pages, ISBN 0-9740711-7-X). This collection assembles fourteen of his tales, six of which have never been rendered into English before. (The four translators—Sheryl Curtis, Jean-Louis Trudel, Dominque Bennett, and Ann Cale—do a marvelous, seamless job, by the way.) Here you'll read about Professor Challenger battling pterodactyls in France (the title story); six juvenile killers who turn on their mentor ("The Parliament of Birds"); an artist whose medium is "slices of time" ("Scenes at the Exhibit"); and a colony of aliens stranded on Earth, who meet yearly for a strange ritual ("Footprints in the Snow"). And this merely cites four wonderful examples. Dunyach at various times evokes comparisons to Ballard, Lem, van Vogt, Zivkovic, or Gibson, but is always recognizably his own unique self. In my favorite story, "Watch Over Me When I Sleep," a shepherd boy swallows a fairy and finds his life forever blighted. George MacDonald himself could not have written a more transcendent fable.

In his introduction to Peter Crowther's new collection, *Songs of Leaving* (Subterranean Press, hardcover, $40.00, 240 pages, ISBN 1-931081-85-9), Adam Roberts categorizes Crowther's stories as not strictly SF or fantasy or horror, but rather as all-embracing "tales of wonder." This perfectly apt description implicitly conjures up comparison to a certain other fantasist who defies pigeonholing, and that man is Harlan Ellison. Reading Crowther's new book is much like discovering a primo Ellison collection you never knew existed. Now, by this I do not mean that Crowther's elegant stories exactly mimic Ellison's in style or angle of attack or tone. From time to time, indeed, you might think of explicit points of contact between Ellison's work and Crowther's, but they would be thematic ones: the role of the alienated members of society; a reverence for certain aspects of pop culture; the tension between youth and maturity; and so on. But the parallel between Crowther and Ellison consists more of the emotional depths they both seek to plumb, the passionate way they both instinctually home in on just the right dramatic situation that will serve as objective correlative to their desired messages. When, in "Elmer," a young boy is trapped in the wreckage of a truck with his dying father, all the smoldering moments of the story prior to this ignite in a hot flash of perfect action. Then you get the same kind of punch as found in many an Ellison classic. Eleven other stories of this same level of poignancy, along with revelatory story notes, make this one of the more luminous collections of the year.

Wry, caustic, calculated, impulsive, veering unpredictably through the skies of imagination like drunken swallows, the stories of Richard Butner call to mind the work of Jonathan Lethem, Mark Leyner,

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and Cory Doctorow. In *Horses Blow Up Dog City & Other Stories* (Small Beer Press, chapbook, $5.00, 63 pages, ISBN unavailable), Butner hews close to contemporary times and settings, but creates gems of gorgeous weirdness that are more exotic than anything found in *Planet Stories*. A Pee wee Herman-style puppeteer blazes a trail through the lives of his friends and the media in the title piece. An unambitious man wins a "Zen Mistress" in a contest and finds his life turned topsy-turvy ("Drifting"). The insanely egocentric career of a supermodel is blithely chronicled in "Lo-fi." A young couple on a road trip pick up an odd hitchhiker: the Devil himself in baggy long underwear ("Ash City Stomp"). And finally, in "The Rules of Gambling," the protagonist finds his muse in the form of the lone employee of the Institute of Predictology. These marvelous characters dancing their ridiculous waltzes will break your heart and make you laugh.

Anthologies and Magazines

The inaugural issue of *Postscripts* (PS Publishing, perfect-bound, $10.00, 170 pages, ISBN 1-904619-20-7) offers as much prime reading as any standout original anthology on the market. Under the editorship of Pete Crowther (ably assisted by Nick Gevers), this new zine compiles fresh work from such famous names as Aldiss, Wolfe, Oates, and Bradbury; plenty of sterling stuff from slightly lesser-known craftsmen such as Stephen Gallagher, Ramsey Campbell, and Peter Hamilton; and introduces new names such as Allan Ashley and Lawrence Gordon Clark. Toss in non-fiction features like Christopher Fowler's essay on the decay of horror literature and a rare interview with James Blaylock, and the result is a mighty impressive book. The fiction here is unanimously well-wrought. I particularly enjoyed James Lovegrove's Sturgeonesque "Seventeen Syllables," about a man who decides to strip his life bare of distractions, and Jay Lake's "The Rose Egg," about the future of high-tech graffiti. But there's not a loser in the bunch here. If *Postscripts* can keep up this high standard, it will soon dominate award ballots and best-of-the-year ToCs everywhere.

The thirteenth issue of *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* (Andromeda Spaceways Publishing, saddle-stapled, Aus$7.95, 128 pages, ISSN 1446-781X) strikes me as one of their best ever—and that's saying a lot, considering the statistics proudly recounted in their editorial: over five hundred thousand words of fiction published since issue one. This time around, the bulk of ASIM is taken up with a rousing interstellar adventure by Stephen Dedman, "The Whole of the Law." But there's still plenty of space for two promising first-sales, Steven Cavanagh's Middle-Earth comedy, "Elf Esteem," and Marion Schweda's "Urban Transit," which examines the bureaucratic nonsense that will one day attend regular use of matter transmitters. Additionally, you'll find such goodies as David Hoffman-Dachelet's "Sambilly's Impractical Noodle Machine," a whimsical yet touching fantasy about a frustrated inventor, and Robert Marsh's "The Truth About Alternate Dimensions," which harks back to pure Kuttner—or maybe Rucker—goofiness.

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The sixth number of *Yellow Bat Review* (Yellow Bat Press, saddle-stapled, $2.50, 60 pages, ISSN 1539-4891) consists mostly of poetry, a goodly portion of the verses fantastical in nature. Familiar names such as Bruce Boston and Michael Arnzen will tempt *Asimov's* readers, but they will also find such offerings as Michael Hemmingson's poem-cycle "Rwanda" rewarding. In a verse such as "Me vs. the Scorpion," Hemmingson gracefully extracts cosmic lessons out of quotidian events—and that's one important definition of the essence of poetry. And Kristine Dikeman's short story, "The New Queen," turns Lewis Carroll into a horror writer—and makes us believe that's not much of a stretch after all.

Maybe the fiction in issue two of *Flytrap* (Tropism Press, saddle stapled, $4.00, 53 pages, ISSN unavailable) could be labeled New Weird or Slipstream, Surreal or Horror. But I prefer just to call it damn fine writing. Under the joint editorship of Tim Pratt and Heather Shaw, this zine boasts an impressive array of prose and poetry from writers little-known to me, yet from whom I expect we'll be hearing much more. Every story here grabs a red-hot trope or conceit and runs for the borders of irreality with it. Just consider "Kank's Last Breath," by Michael Canfield, in which a connoisseur of dying exhalations journeys far to make a special purchase. Or Rudi Dornemann's "The Labyrinth Tourist," which resonates with the exotic graphic novels of Schuiten and Peeters. Handsomely designed and lovingly illustrated, this zine deserves your patronage so that it might continue to flourish, benefiting us all.

Once upon a time, and a very good time it was, there was a zine named *Say . . .* which sought to reinvent itself with every issue by adding an interrogative clause to its name. The fourth time it did this trick, it called itself *Say . . . Why Aren't We Crying?* (Fortress of Words, perfect-bound, $5.00, 68 pages, ISSN unavailable), and the results were splendid. Jude-Marie Green traffics in the future of interior decorating, ribofunk-style, in "Til the Wildness Cried Aloud." David Schwartz gives a deadpan yet affecting account of a poor fellow with a lacunae-ridden memory in "The Lethe Man." And E.L. Chen's comic strip "Why Aren't We Crying" encapsulates this issue's theme in a witty, metafictional manner. That's just for starters, of course. And take my word for it: you'll be shedding tears of regret if you don't subscribe to *Say . . .*, the zine of a thousand faces.

Surely the grandmother or patron saint of the current crop of experimental, path-breaking zines is *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, the production of Kelly Link and Gavin Grant. Through their example of boldness, determination, and offbeat eclecticism, other publishers and editors and writers have been moved to galvanize the formerly moribund zine scene. As has been said of the Velvet Underground and the genesis of subsequent bands, everyone who reads *LCRW* wants to start their own zine. Issue 14 (Small Beer Press, saddle-stapled, $5.00, 68 pages, ISSN 1544-7782) demonstrates once again that Grant and Link have their vision honed smooth and sharp. James Sallis contributes two beautiful wistful accounts of everyday life viewed awry. Bret Fetzer delivers a fractured fairy

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tale. Deborah Roggie crafts a genre-friendly piece that would not be amiss in the pages of *Realms of Fantasy*. And a dozen other contributors shine as well. Old as Methuselah in small-press years, *LCRW* shows no signs of hardening of the arteries.

The publishing company known as Phobos Books runs a regular contest for new writers, and displays the winning entries in a series of anthologies. With their latest book, *Absolutely Brilliant in Chrome* (trade paper, $14.95, 351 pages, ISBN 0-9720026-3-4), they've solicited new stories from past winners in order to compile, under the editorship of Keith Olexa, a collection that exhibits some solid narrative virtues and pleasures, but which, alas, does not break any new ground. The stories herein are all competently told, and range across the fertile fields of SF: future war, time travel, human bioengineering, exploration of alien worlds, and so on. But there's an air of conceptual timidity about them all. For instance, Gordon Gross (who is in reality a husband-and-wife team of Harold Gross and Eve Gordon) spend almost fifty pages arranging a legal contest between a man and his digital upload, a riff that would be a throwaway line in a Charles Stross story. And the almost complete lack of stylistic variation among the authors here—I'd except Rebecca Carmi's first-person voice and Daniel Conover's gonzo *Men in Black* pastiche—produces a certain tepid sameness in the collection. I enjoyed these stories as pleasant transient diversions, but none of them showed the staying power or the creative engagement of the best of the magazine work discussed above.

Miscellaneous Titles

Any reader with a scintilla of interest in either a) SF; b) comics; or c) foreign expressions of a) and b) will leap with a yelp of excitement upon *Shadowmen 2: Heroes and Villains of French Comics* (Black Coat Press, trade paperback, $20.95, 319 pages, ISBN 0-9740711-8-8). Meticulously compiled and written by Jean-Marc and Randy L'Officier as a companion volume to the first *Shadowmen* encyclopedia (which I reviewed a few columns ago), this book catalogues the highlights of fantastical Gallic comic art. You may know of Barbarella, and possibly Lone Sloane, but who among us has heard of Fantax, Durga Rani, Wampus, or Felina? Yet all of these characters had long and glorious runs, which the L'Officiers thoroughly document and synopsize. Numerous B&W illos provide plenteous eye-candy, and the fun comes in comparing and contrasting the French heroes with their US counterparts. Superboy, for instance, is not the same everywhere, and that's what makes life exciting.

Star Hawks: The Complete Series (Hermes Press, trade paper, $29.99, 320 pages, ISBN 1-932563-62-8), by Gil Kane, Ron Goulart, Archie Goodwin, and Roger MacKenzie is an astonishing artifact. Immaculately laid out and reproduced, replete with good historical apparatus that grounds the material, and with bonus color pages, this thick, over-sized book rescues from oblivion a satisfying but ultimately frustrating moment of SF history. Shortly after the success of the first *Star Wars* film in 1977, artist Gil Kane and writer Ron Goulart managed to launch a daily SF newspaper strip titled *Star Hawks*. Set in

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Goulart's Barnum universe as found in his novels of the sixties, the strip concerned handsome and daring Rex Jaxon and his partner, the womanizing, Gypsy-like Chavez, interplanetary law enforcers putting down diverse threats to the galactic peace. From the first, Goulart's witty, compact, and fast-moving scripts meshed brilliantly with Kane's dynamic art. Kane's aliens never looked more convincing, his men more bold, nor his women more luscious. Given two tiers of space on the page each day, Kane could experiment wildly with panel formats, and did so to his heart's content. The result was a literate SF adventure strip—which of course was doomed to failure, caviar for the unappreciative *Mary Worth* masses. Goulart was eventually fired, to be replaced by Goodwin, then by MacKenzie, both of whom lacked his panache and inventiveness. The strip was reduced to a single daily tier, and then Sunday pages were eliminated. It all sadly peters out in the last few pages. But for the bulk of this rapturous volume, we can enjoy a wild ride through the cosmos and fantasize about what the comics pages of our newspapers would look like had *Star Hawks* found the audience it deserved.

The last painting cartoonist Vaughn Bodé finished before his untimely death in 1975 was a large spread of his famous be-hatted antihero, Cheech Wizard, leading a girl, a dog, a lion, a scarecrow, and a tin man down a yellow brick road. Titled "The Lizard of Oz," the image was all that existed of Bodé's hypothetical take on Baum's fantasy classic. But now, thanks to his son, Mark Bodé, who has taken up the mantle of his father's outrageous style and themes in exemplary fashion, we get the graphic novel titled *The Lizard of Oz* (Fantagraphics, trade paper, $12.95, 57 pages, ISBN 1-56097-595-4), and it proves to be worth the wait of three decades. Bodé the Younger displays all of his Dad's irreverence, goofiness, and proclivity for drawing sexily upholstered nymphs and goofy reptilian men. Some of the satire is predictable, but the imagery remains awesome. You have never contemplated all the counterfactual variations of Oz until you've seen the team hauling Cheech Wizard's carriage: a bevy of bondage-clad, polka-dotted women in harness. Vaughn Bodé himself is allusively depicted on page forty-three, and I think he would be proud to find himself in these colorful funny pages.

Humanoids Publishing has recently engineered a distribution deal with DC Comics, which in turn is part of the Time-Warner empire. Does this render Humanoids not part of the small-press scene any longer? I'm not sure, but I do know that I would be remiss in not pointing out to you the publication of *The Technopriests: Book I: Initiation* (trade paper, $14.95, 160 pages, ISBN 1-4012-0359-0). Masterminded by polymath Alejandro Jodorowsky, this book—allied with his other series, *The Incal* and *The Metabarons*—is, simply put, the best SF being done in the graphics novel field these days. Jodorowsky's decadent, brutal far-future of guilds and star-travel, barbarism and revenge, is like Frank Herbert's space-opera mated with noir, spaghetti westerns and some Aubrey Beardsley and van Vogt thrown in for good measure. Embodied in the meticulous, baroque, insanely de-

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tailed art of Zoran Janjetov, Jodorowsky's narrative—here concerning itself with the rough path that a young boy named Albino must take to become the master of the games that underpin interstellar society—flies along at breakneck speed without any infodumps or cringing fealty to sober speculation. Who cares how an "electropineal gland" might work, when presented with mindblowing vistas of virtual reality? Jodorowsky keeps a dual narrative—the fate of Albino's mother and siblings—spinning along as well, and this saga of piracy and rapine across the stars counterbalances the more cerebral plot. If you don't become an acolyte of *The Technopriests*, you'll be damned to an afterlife of reading nothing but *Star Wars* graphic novels.

Few SF authors have oeuvres substantial enough to merit book-length studies. But Ken MacLeod certainly qualifies, since his well-written leftist space operas have all provided plenty of meat for thought. And to stipulate that he's only been publishing since 1995 is to add further luster to his career. Now the folks from the UK's Science Fiction Foundation, in the persons of editors Farah Mendelson and Andrew M. Butler, have assembled *The True Knowledge of Ken MacLeod* (SF Foundation, hardcover, $30.00, 136 pages, ISBN 0-903007-02-9), and it's a winning volume. MacLeod himself contributes essays and interviews, while a host of critics and reviewers tackle the themes of his work, from utopianism to transhumanism, from libertarianism to feminism. The writing is seldom pedantic, the enthusiasm heartfelt, and the critical standards high. If you've enjoyed MacLeod's novels, this book will only enhance your pleasures.

Also on the critical front, we find Damien Broderick's *x, y, z, t: Dimensions of Science Fiction* (Borgo/Wildside, trade paper, $17.95, 264 pages, ISBN 0-8095-0927-X), a collection of essays that had former lives in various publications, now retrofitted into a brilliantly coherent whole. Much like Damon Knight's *In Search of Wonder* (1956), this volume uses whatever newish books come to hand, salted with copious thoughts on the classics of the genre, as the jumping-off point for scintillating theoretical discussions of SF's uses, failings, directions, and destinations. An extremely talented fiction writer as well as critic, Broderick brings an intimate understanding of how SF is composed, marketed, and perceived to the table. Like Knight, he can be fascinating whether discussing flawed one-shot wonders (David Palmer's *Emergence* [1984]) or masterpieces from Bester, Pohl, Asimov, and others. And his prose is zesty and inviting, full of witty metaphors. Nothing academic or stodgy here. Is science fiction really "the crazed biker of literature, sloppy-grinned, barreling back down the wrong side of the road into the shrieking traffic"? Read Broderick, and find out!

You know the work of Paul Frees, even if you do not know his name or face. A consummate "voice actor," he lurked behind the animated characters of Boris Badenov, Ludwig Von Drake, and even the Pillsbury Dough Boy! Additionally, his voice greeted every rider on Disney's Haunted Mansion attraction since that ride's inception. But there was so much more to the man, and we are indebted to author Ben Ohmart

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for providing a breezy yet comprehensive biography of Frees: *Welcome, Foolish Mortals . . .* (Bear Manor Media, trade paper, $29.95, 284 pages, ISBN 1-59393-004-6). Here we get to witness Frees's early days in radio, his transition to the big screen, his involvement with animation, and his dubbing and advertising work.

But aside from the professional aspects of Frees' life, we are privy to his offstage personality and shenanigans (Frees was a true eccentric), thanks to extensive interviews with surviving friends, relatives, and co-workers. It's a balanced warts-and-all kind of treatment, neither excessively reverential nor sniping, and makes for fascinating reading. Frees intersected SF innumerable times—he had small parts in *The Thing* (1951) and *War of the Worlds* (1953), for instance—and his amazing voice helped form the fond memories of a generation. Read this book, and the next time you pop a *Bullwinkle* DVD into the player, dedicate a moment to the memory of Paul Frees.

Publisher Addresses

Andromeda Spaceways Publishing, POB 495, Bentley WA 6982, Australia. Bear Manor Media, POB 750, Boalsburg, PA 16827. Black Coat Press, POB 17270, Encino, CA 91416. Cosmos Books, see Wildside. E-Reads, 171 East 74th Street, New York, NY 10021. Fantagraphics, 7563 Lake City Way NE, Seattle, WA 98115. Fortress of Words, POB 1304, Lexington, KY 40508. Hermes Press, 2100 Wilmington Road, Neshannock, PA 16105. Humanoids Publishing, POB 931658, Hollywood, CA 90094. Phobos Books, 200 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10003. PS Publishing, 1 Hamilton House, 4 Park Avenue, Harrogate, UK HG2 9BQ. Robert J. Sawyer Books, Red Deer Press, 813 MacKimmie Library Tower, 2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2N 1N4. SF Foundation, 22 Addington Road, Reading RG1 5PT, U.K., or through Old Earth Books, POB 19951, Baltimore, MD 21211. Small Beer Press, 176 Prospect Avenue, Northampton, MA 01060. Subterranean Press, POB 190106, Burton, MI 48519. Tachyon Publications, 1459 18th Street, #139, SF, CA 94107. Tropism Press, POB 13322, Berkeley, CA 94712. Wicker Park Press, c/o Academy Chicago Publishers, 363 W. Erie Street, Chicago, IL 60610. Wildside, POB 301, Holicong, PA 18928. Yellow Bat Press, 1338 West Maumee, Idlewilde Manor #136, Adrian, MI 49221. ○

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SF Conventional Calendar

It's time for the national conventions of the UK, Australia and New Zealand. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

FEBRUARY 2005

4–6—**UK Nat'l. Filk Con.** For info, write: **c/o Weingart, 263 Sprucewood Dr., Levittown NY 11756.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) contabile.org.uk. (E-mail) dixseption@contabile.org.uk.** Con will be held in: Southsea UK (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: The Gordon-Kerrs, Chua. SF/fantasy folksinging.

4–6—**All-Con. all-con.org.** Sterling Hotel, Dallas TX. Barry Diamond, Adam Hughes. SF and gaming emphasis.

10–13—**CapriCon. capricon.org.** Sheraton NW, Arlington Heights (Chicago) IL. James P. Hogan, Shaenon K. Garrity.

11–13—**Farpoint. farpoint.com.** Marriott, Hunt Valley (Baltimore) MD. Jeffrey Combs, Kathy Garver. Trek & media SF.

18–20—**Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. boskone.org.** Sheraton, Boston MA. O. S. Card, A. Pollack, Glyer.

18–20—**VisionCon, Box 1415, Springfield MO 65801. (417) 886-7219. visioncon.net.** Clarion. Gary Bedell, M. Capps.

18–20—**Gallifrey, Box 3021, N. Hollywood CA 91609. gallifreyone.com.** Los Angeles CA. Guests TBA. Dr. Who.

18–20—**WonderCon, Box 128458, San Diego CA 92112. comic-con.org.** Moscone, San Francisco CA. Comics & anime.

24–27—**Left Coast Crime, 2626 N. Mesa #261, El Paso TX 79902. leftcoastcrime2005.com.** Camino Real. Mysteries.

25–27—**SheVaCon, Box 416, Verona VA 24482. shevacon.org.** Tanglewood, Roanoke VA. L. Modesitt, T. Hildebrandt.

25–27—**Redemption, 26 King's Meadow View, Wetherby LS22 7FX, UK. conventions.org.uk/redemption.** B7/Bab 5.

MARCH 2005

4–6—**Potlatch, c/o Box 5328 Berkeley CA 94704. potlatch-sf.org.** Ramada Plaza, San Francisco CA. Written SF.

11–13—**StellarCon, 5701 Running Ridge Rd., Greensboro NC 27407. (336) 294-8041. stellarcon.org.**

11–13—**MeCon, 12 Hopefield Ave., Belfast BT15 5AP, UK. mecon.org.** Queen's U. Ian MacDonald, Paul J. Holden.

12–13—**DortCon, c/o Behrend, Bocksledde 35, Wuppertal 42283, Germany. dortcon.de.** Dortmund. A. Reynolds.

18–20—**LunaCon, 847A 2nd Ave. #234, New York NY 10017. lunacon.org.** Sheraton, Meadowlands NJ (near NY City).

18–20—**TechniCon, Box 256, Blacksburg VA 24063. technicon.org.** L. M. Bujold. Theme: "The Age of Chivalry."

24–28—**SwanCon, Box G429, Perth WA 6841, Australia. swancon.com.** Hilton. C. Dickenson, J. Long.

25–27—**UK Nat'l. Con, 4 Burnside Ave., Sheffield S8 9FR, UK. +44 (0) 114 281-0674. paragon2.org.uk.** Hinckley.

25–27—**NZ Nat'l. Con, Box 13-574, Johnsonville, Wellington, NZ. icon.sf.org.nz.** Orson Scott Card, Bill Geradts.

MAY 2005

21–28—**Analog & Asimov's SF Cruise. sciencefictioncruise.com.** Carnival Glory, to the Caribbean. Dozois, Schmidt.

AUGUST 2005

4–8—**Interaction, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk.** Glasgow Scotland. $170+/£95+.

SEPTEMBER 2005

1–5—**CascadiaCon, Box 1066, Seattle WA 98111. www.seattle2005.org.** The NASFiC, while WorldCon's in Glasgow. $75.

AUGUST 2006

23–27—**LACon IV, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. info@laconiv.com.** Anaheim CA. Connie Willis. The WorldCon. $125.

AUGUST 2007

30–Sept. 3—**Nippon 2007, Box 314, Annapolis Jct. MD 20701. nippon2007.org.** Yokohama Japan. WorldCon $160+

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NEXT ISSUE

APRIL/MAY DOUBLE ISSUE

Next issue is our April/May Special Double Issue, jammed to the gills (do magazines *have* gills?) with great stuff from both hot new writers and some of the Biggest Names in the business.

Our lead story for April/May is a complex and suspenseful new novella by Nebula-winner **Walter Jon Williams**. In "Solidarity," he spins a deadly web of intrigue, revolution, conspiracy, betrayal, and counter-betrayal on a subjugated planet recently occupied by a harsh and ruthless conquering alien force . . . and opposed by a few determined people who are about to find out just *how far* they'll have to go, and how ruthless they themselves will have to become, in order to kick them off the planet . . . Don't miss it!

ALSO IN APRIL/MAY

Nebula and Hugo-winner **Gardner Dozois**, Nebula, Hugo, and World Fantasy Award-winner **George R.R. Martin**, and hot new writer **Daniel Abraham** join their talents in a fast-paced and exciting novella that takes us to a distant planet to unravel an enigmatic alien mystery with potentially deadly consequences for the entire world, in "Shadow Twin"; **William Barton** returns to relate some of the harrowing things that can happen after the End of the World in "Dark of the Sun"; new writers **Michael J. Jasper** and **Greg van Eekhout** (making his *Asimov's* fiction debut) lead us on a wild and free-wheeling hunt to track down the "California King"; Hugo and Nebula-winner **Mike Resnick** shows a man in the midst of making the most difficult choice of his life, as he takes us on a poignant trip "Down Memory Lane"; **Wil McCarthy** returns after a long absence to warn you that if you're not careful, "They Will Raise You in a Box"; **Neal Asher** joins battle with "Mason's Rats"; **Robert Reed**, one of our most popular and prolific authors, treats us to "Dallas: An Essay"; **Liz Williams** guides us through a scary encounter with "La Grand Muerte"; new writer **Jack Skillingstead** takes us on a quest for the ultimate cup of coffee, and assures us that he's "Bean There"; and colorful and inventive writer **Ian Watson** paints a portrait of a man who's a "Lover of Statues"—in a rather unusual way.

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column dreams up some "Fantasies About Fiction"; **Norman Spinrad's** "On Books" column speculates about "No Surrender?"; and **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" column experiments with "Breathing the Blogosphere"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our April/May 2005 Special Double Issue on sale at your newsstand on March 8, 2005. Or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the fantastic stuff we have coming up for you next year (you can also subscribe to *Asimov's* online, in varying formats, including in downloadable form for your PDA, by going to our website, *www.asimovs.com*).

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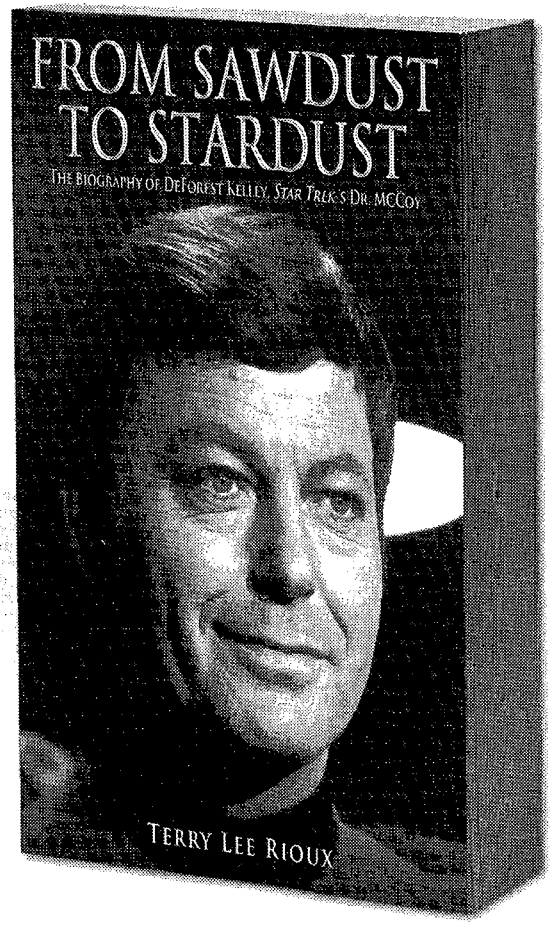

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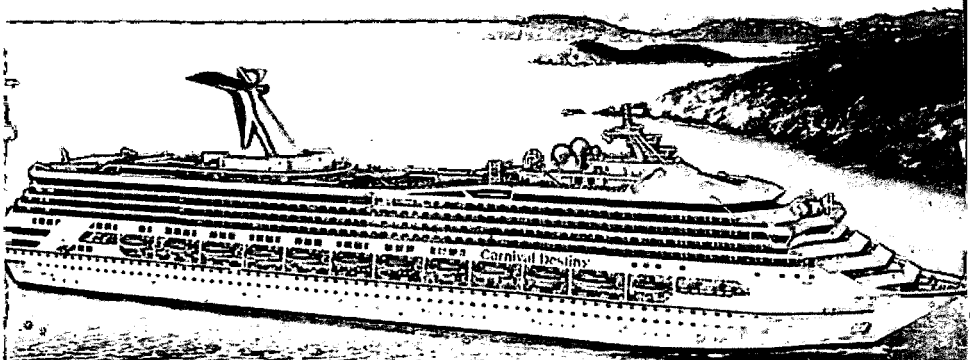

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